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**THE RAVENSCROFT AFFAIR**



*The  
Ravenscroft  
Affair*

BY  
**GUY THORNE**



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**THE RAVENSCROFT AFFAIR**



# THE RAVENSCROFT AFFAIR

## CHAPTER I

“**T**HREE’s your week’s salary and another one instead of notice, Mr. Penrose. There was a meeting of the Board of Directors this morning when it was decided to dispense with your services. We don’t want any cinema operators in this picture palace who interfere with the manager. You’ve got the sack, young fellow, the dirty kick-out!”

Mr. Schweinberg, the director of the Oriental Picture Palace in Oxford Street, leant back in his chair and grinned evilly at the tall, clean-shaven young man standing at the table. Mr. Schweinberg was a big, blond Jew with many rings sparkling on his fingers and a large black pearl in his evening shirt. His puffy face was a mask of mean and vulgar triumph.

The young man at the table picked up an envelope of money and dropped it into the side

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pocket of his lounge suit. He did this with great deliberation.

"I hear," he said "that you have also dismissed the young lady programme seller whom I prevented you from persecuting."

"I don't know what business it is of yours," Schweinberg replied. "Sweet on her yourself, I suppose—but your information is perfectly correct."

"Thanks," Penrose answered, "I just wanted to make sure, and now let's settle our accounts."

"Accounts?" the coarse creature spluttered, "you've had your money, and now be off, you insolent puppy."

A rather grim smile came upon the clever, clean-shaven face of Charlie Penrose.

"You are going, Mr. Schweinberg," he said in a quiet voice, "to experience one of the most unpleasant moments of your life."

The Jew half rose from his chair. His face suddenly turned grey, in which the purple of his thick lips made an odd colour contrast. His dark, shifty eyes glanced nervously towards the corner of his office, where under an electric light there was a bell-push. Penrose whipped round the big writing-table in a second. His arms shot

out, and he caught the Jew's nose between the first and second fingers of his right hand, hauling the man to a standing position with a swift jerk. The whole thing happened in an instant, and before the Jew's cry of agony was well out of his mouth his adversary had knocked him clean against the opposite wall of the room with a quick left-hander.

The curly yellow head smashed full into the centre of a big, gilt-framed mirror with a resounding crash and tinkle of falling glass. Charlie Penrose never forgot the momentary picture. Certainly during his year as a cinema operator in the great Oxford Street theatre he had never shown any film so ludicrous or true to life!

The man's eyes were starting out of his head. His pendulous and flabby cheeks shook like jellies. His mouth was wide open, his nose the colour of coral, and over all his coarse, gross face was an expression of surprise that was grotesquely comic. Charlie had once seen a codfish nosing the glass front of its tank in the Brighton Aquarium. Mr. Schweinberg looked exactly like that. The young man was outwardly cool, though inwardly possessed by a tearing rage.

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Yet his sense of humour flashed for a moment, and in the middle of his anger he laughed.

The next instant the brilliantly lit sanctum of the manager resounded with hideous cries for help.

In sheer desperation Schweinberg rushed at the young man like a bull. He was a big, heavy man who habitually over-ate himself and drank too much, and though his arms were whirling wildly in the air and he had no more knowledge of fighting than a hog the mere weight of his impetus bore the young man down upon the floor.

But Penrose had been an athlete in happier days, before certain circumstances had forced him to take up the work of a cinema operator at two pounds a week.

He rolled out of the other's way with a single sudden movement, leapt to his feet without touching the ground with his hands, and hit the Jew fair and square between the eyes.

It was the last satisfaction Charlie had in this brief contest—if contest it can be called. The manager's shouts had been heard; a huge commissionaire in the gaudy livery of the theatre burst into the room.

"Kill him! Kill him! Kick him out!" the Jew shrieked, with horrid oaths. "He'll murder me!"

In a second Charlie was powerless in the grip of the giant, who whipped him out of the room with the greatest ease and ran him down a short passage to the room where the operators kept their hats and coats.

"Well I'm blowed!" the commissionaire remarked, letting his captive go free. "Whatever have you been a-doing of, Mr. Penrose? You've gone and knocked the governor about dreadful!"

"And I'd do it again, Tom, if I got the chance," Charlie replied. "It is about that business with Miss Jones. The old beast was trying to kiss her three days ago, and she was frightened out of her life. I put a stop to it and I've got the sack."

"And a bit of your own back too, Mr. Penrose, I should say," the commissionaire replied with a wink. Mr. Schweinberg was not popular with the employees of the cinema theatre. "But if I were you I'd get out of this as quickly as possible."

"I will," Charlie answered, "but he won't bring any action, you may be quite sure. He

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daren't for his own sake. Well, good night, Tom, and good-bye."

The two shook hands, and the last words Charlie heard as he passed through the swing doors at the back of the theatre were, "Sorry you're leaving us, Mr. Penrose."

It was about a quarter past ten on a cold November night. The little back street in which Penrose found himself was absolutely quiet. Beyond came the unceasing roar of Oxford Street, like the beating of waves upon a distant beach. He felt glad that he had done what he had done. He was certain that the Jew dare not prosecute him. So far so good. But the fact of his dismissal was a very different affair indeed. Brought up in considerable luxury, sent to a first-class public school, at the age of eighteen the young man had been thrown upon his own resources by a rascally solicitor who was also his guardian. Without any trade or profession, he had known what it was to go through the bitterest depths of poverty in London. The new profession of cinema operator had kept him in moderate comfort for a year. Now he saw himself again within measurable distance of the old and dreadful privations.

Charlie sighed and shivered—the night was cold. At the far end of the street there was a little public-house with a private bar. He began to walk slowly towards it, for he had arranged to meet Wag Ashton, the light-weight boxer and professor of physical culture, with whom he had shared a tiny flat in Soho for the last twelve months.

What should he say to Wag now? Things had gone badly lately with his stable companion also. Wag had been unable to earn any money for two months. The rent of the flat was overdue. There were other minor debts.

“Oh for a chance!” Charlie murmured to himself as he came up to the bar. “Oh, for a chance to get out of all this; to live, to rise from the mud into some sphere of life which is real and actual, where things go on and where a fellow can have a chance!”

He heard his own voice, and smiled bitterly. No! there would be no chance for him, there could not be any. The only thing was to continue and endure.

He pushed open the door of the private bar and entered, without a single premonition, the slightest hint that upon that very night his whole

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life was to be changed with a swiftness and rapidity beyond belief. No voice told him that even within an hour the world would begin to be for him—and for the little friend he saw sitting moodily at the counter of the bar—an utterly changed place. He thought he was a ruined man; he had not an inkling of the fact that he was about to embark upon the ship that leads to Fortune. He thought that save for Wag Ashton he had no friend in the world; save for a few petty creditors no enemies whatever. Nothing warned him that within a few short hours he was to have the firmest friends and most malignant enemies that man could know.

Of all the young men among the teeming millions of London, Fate had chosen out Charlie Penrose to-night.

Wag Ashton was a slim, brown-faced little man dressed in tweeds which had lost their first freshness. His blue eyes radiated an unconquerable good humour, but they were also very watchful and alert. He was sitting on a high stool before a half-emptied glass of bitter beer, obviously a man trained to a hair—perhaps half a dozen good dinners would have done him good.

Charlie told his friend what had happened in a few brief and graphic sentences.

"I feel as if I could kick the shins of the whole world," he said as they left the bar.

"Well, I should like to give it a punch in the jaw myself," the boxer answered. "There's the rent of the flat two weeks overdue, half a dozen other pressing bills, and not a red cent between us both."

"Well, I've got two weeks' salary," Charlie replied. "That's four pounds, at any rate."

"I've got four and twopence," Wag returned. "I've no pupils for boxing, physical culture, or even jiu-jitsu. I was at the National Sporting Club this evening, and I might have fixed up a match with Driscoll, the Mullion Cove they call him, but who was to put the stake money down for me? I am practically unknown in London. Charlie, old boy, our luck's dead out."

"Then let's go and have a jolly good supper at Peliti's," Charlie answered. "Hang the expense—thank heaven for the little Italian restaurants of Soho."

They walked a few yards and turned the corner into the roaring tide of Oxford Street. The great thoroughfare was brilliantly lit.

Hundreds of carriages, taxi-cabs, and motor omnibuses were passing up and down; the houses towards the splendid region of Hyde Park were blazing with light. It was a clear cold night without a breath of wind.

At the corner of the side street, as the two men turned, a short, broad-figured man was standing smoking a cigar. He wore a heavy fur-lined coat, the collar and cuffs trimmed with Astrakhan, and a silk hat was on his head. His feet were small and encased in patent leather boots.

A curious thing occurred as the partners came out into London's great artery. They were passing the corner, dejectedly enough, and with very little interest in their surroundings, when the well-dressed stranger turned his head with a sudden jerk and stared into Charlie's face with a keen and eager scrutiny. The man's look was not in the least that of a casual passer-by. It showed marked interest—it spoke of something, though what it was neither of them had any idea. This in itself was sufficiently arresting, but there was yet another circumstance which made it even more startling.

The stranger was an Oriental; his face was of

a pale yellow, his cheek-bones high, the eyes, under delicately pencilled black brows, were almond-shaped.

"That chap will know you again," Wag Ashton muttered as the couple crossed the street. "A Japanese, I should imagine—any friends from the Far East?"

Charlie laughed. "No friends anywhere, old fellow, worse luck," he said, "except you. Curious face that man had; sense of power about it, didn't you think?"

Wag shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps," he said indifferently. "London's full of Japanese just at present. They've got money—you see how well that man was dressed—they come over here to learn our customs. But supper is what I'm thinking of, Charlie. I could eat a whale."

The friends walked eastwards for two or three hundred yards, and then turned into one of the long streets which lead to Soho—that foreign, cosmopolitan quarter of London where members of every nation may be found, living mysterious lives in the very heart of the metropolis.

There was hardly anyone in the street at this hour; nobody at all as they turned into a short cut or alley-way between two rows of tall and

ancient houses. They were in the middle of this passage—both of them knew Soho like a book—when Wag Ashton's boot-lace came undone. He put his foot upon a step and was tying the lace, when echoing footsteps reached them from behind.

Both men looked up. The passage was sufficiently well lighted for them to see anyone approaching.

"By Jove, Wag," Charlie said suddenly, "there's our Oriental friend again!"

There was no doubt about it. The well-dressed Japanese was sauntering towards them down the alley, swinging a neatly rolled umbrella in his right hand, his cigar between two gloved fingers of his left.

Both men stared for a moment at the approaching figure, and then walked on.

"It is very odd," Charlie said; "it is almost as though he were following us, though I don't know why on earth he should."

"It doesn't matter," Wag replied. "London is full of queer things and strange people. It is only a coincidence, old sport"; and in three minutes more both men had pushed through the swing doors of Peliti's snug little restaurant.

There were very few people in the long, low room with its mirror-lined walls, its red plush seats and rows of tables. Madame Peliti, a vast, dark-haired dame with heavy diamond ear-rings, was seated behind the little counter which was covered with plates and bottles. The two waiters were gossiping together at the far end of the room. Madame gave the young men a smile of welcome—they were very frequent customers of her house, and Paolo the waiter, with a flash of white teeth under his black moustache, hurried up to take their orders.

Taking off their coats, Charlie and Wag sat down at their accustomed table. They began to look at the bill of fare with anxious attention. As a matter of fact, neither of them had made more than mere apologies for meals during the day. They were both ravenously hungry, and, despite the desperate state of their fortunes, were determined to enjoy themselves for one hour at least in this warm and friendly place.

The swing door of the restaurant suddenly burst open. Charlie and Wag looked up. Then their interest in the bill of fare ceased.

The new-comer was the fashionably dressed Japanese gentleman. He raised his hat to

Madame Peliti, and approached their table with a bland and ingratiating smile.

"I must beg your pardon so very much," he said in a smooth voice, "but I am so anxious to have a word with you in private, Mr. Penrose."

Charlie started. "I don't think I have the pleasure——" he stammered.

"No, you do not know me, Mr. Penrose, but I know your name and have something quite important to say—if you will allow me."

"Say it by all means, sir," Charlie replied, "but I have no secrets from my friend here, Mr. Ashton."

"No! How very delightful," the Japanese replied in his perfect English. "Supposing, gentlemen, you do me the honour of taking a little supper with me?"

The request was odd, but both Charlie and his friend were rather reckless. To sup with this quiet mannered Japanese would commit them to nothing. They blushed and accepted.

In five minutes a supper far beyond their modest aspirations was set before them. A bottle of excellent champagne made its appearance, and before they knew where they were

they had forgotten the oddness of the introduction and were making a hearty meal.

The Japanese was charming. He was obviously a man of the world, and interested the two young men extremely. They were exhilarated by the excellent supper, the champagne, and more than all by the perfect manners of their strange host.

Now and then Charlie noticed that he looked quickly at the clock upon the wall of the restaurant. At last, when coffee was brought, the Asiatic leant over the table and began to speak to him in a voice which suddenly became business-like.

“Possibly, Mr. Penrose, you have wondered at the reason which has procured me the pleasure of your society and that of your friend at supper? London is full of surprises, and it may be that during your career in the Metropolis you have met with many such a frolic as this? But I have sought you out with a definite reason. You are a cinematograph operator, Mr. Penrose?”

Charlie nodded.

“So I imagined,” the Japanese returned, carefully selecting a cigarette from a gold case. “In

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fact, I knew it. Now, Mr. Penrose, I suppose you would not be averse to earning a sum of—let us say—thirty-five pounds, for a couple of hours' work to-night?"

Charlie was silent for a moment. The proposition took him like a hand on his throat.

Thirty-five pounds! At the moment it was a fortune! His heart was beating furiously. The drab, inhospitable world seemed all rose-coloured again. "For two hours to-night?" he gasped, when he had found his voice again.

"For two hours," was the quick answer. The stranger smiled kindly. He took a morocco case from his pocket and pushed three five-pound notes over the table.

"This must serve as a guarantee of my good faith, Mr. Penrose," he said, "and now a few words of further explanation."

"But I haven't said that I'll accept yet," Charlie replied.

The Japanese waved his hand as if such a thing need not be discussed. The motion was sufficient. Charlie took up the notes and slipped them in his pocket. He was warmed by the excellent supper. He was reckless; he was ready

for any adventure, especially so profitable a one as this.

The keen-eyed Asiatic seemed to read his every thought. "This is a private matter between you and me," he said, "but there is nothing in it which in any way reflects upon your honour. All I ask is absolute secrecy on your part. You do not know who I am, and for certain reasons I cannot tell you. After this evening it is improbable that we shall ever meet again. The duty required from you is simply to show a couple of films in a private house in London. I will take you there at once. You mustn't object if the blinds of the car are drawn down, and if when leaving it to enter the house I momentarily tie a handkerchief round your eyes. The same applies, too, when you leave the house. You will be driven away in the same car and be put down in a central quarter of London."

"If there's anything shady about it in any way—" Charlie began.

"You may rest absolutely assured upon that point. The secrecy is unavoidable, but you will not be involved in anything whatever. You will simply show some fantastic but quite unobjec-

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tionable films, and directly you have ceased working the machine you will be paid the remainder of your fee and your connection with the matter will entirely cease."

Charlie jumped up. "Let's start at once," he said.

The three men left the restaurant together, the Japanese going first. Charlie took the opportunity to thrust the three five-pound notes into Wag's hand. The little party had hardly come out upon the pavement of the quiet street when a big black motor-car rolled noiselessly up to them. With a wave of his hand to his friend, Charlie jumped in, followed by the Asiatic, and as the door clicked into its place without any perceptible pause the car shot away.

All the blinds were drawn, but an electric light hung from the roof, and Charlie noticed with a start the extraordinary luxury of all the fittings. He had never been in a car so perfectly appointed, and now, for the first time, a sense of the inexplicable mystery rushed over him. He had not the slightest fear. He was far too unimportant a person to be kidnapped. He was certain that the Japanese had spoken truly. Yet what on earth did it all mean? Who

were these people who offered a large sum to a stranger? Who was this well-dressed man of the world—this obviously aristocratic Japanese—who owned a car like this which was driving him through the London streets in secrecy?

He lit a cigarette and turned to his companion. The Japanese was all attention at once. Directly Charlie began to speak his face lit up with a suave and pleasant smile. But the young man's attempts to pierce the mystery met with an instant refusal, though couched in the most courteous terms. The Japanese immediately began to talk of other matters. He told of curious and interesting customs of his native country, and his conversation was so brilliant, so full of colour and epigram that when the car stopped with an almost imperceptible jerk, and a silk handkerchief was whipped quickly round his eyes, Charlie stepped out, crossed a strip of pavement, and was guided up some steps into a house as if in a dream.

He found himself in a luxuriously furnished hall. It was panelled in white. A staircase ran up to galleries which surrounded it. There was a glimpse of splendid pictures here and there as a grave-faced, thoroughly English butler con-

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ducted him to a door at one side and escorted him into a small room hung with blue tapestry. There was a fire upon the hearth; the place was absolutely still.

Charlie remained there for nearly five minutes. His mind was in a whirl, but he had time to perceive that the place was crowded with objects of Art which he knew, despite his ignorance in such things, must have been of very great value. At the end of the five minutes the door opened and the Japanese entered once more.

"Will you kindly follow me," he said in a brisk, business-like voice, in which Charlie thought he discerned some latent excitement. They went out of the room, and walked down two passages. Once Charlie turned his head, thinking he heard following footsteps. He saw a moon-faced man padding noiselessly behind them, an Oriental in a flowered silk robe.

A door was opened. His host of the restaurant led him into a low gallery which was at the end of a long room with a wagon roof. It was obviously the music-room of some great London house.

At the far end a white screen had been stretched. Within a yard of Charlie was a port-

able cinematograph machine. Down below, in the centre of the room, which was separated from the gallery by a low balustrade, were three or four lounge chairs and a settee.

"Get to the machine quickly, please," said the Japanese.

Charlie did so.

"All right?" the other asked in a low voice.

Charlie, with his hand close to the electric switches, saw that the film he was to show was already wound upon the spools. He nodded without speaking, and the next moment the hall beyond was plunged into darkness. The Japanese touched his arm. "When I say 'Begin,'" he whispered, "you will kindly turn on the mechanism."

A door was heard to open in the room below. There was a noise of shuffling footsteps. It was a curious sound Charlie thought. There was something sinister in it as it came softly up through the darkness. The heavy carpet which covered the floor would surely have drowned all ordinary noise. It seemed as if a group of people were carrying something. With a throb of his heart Charlie recalled an expressive line of Tennyson—"Like footsteps upon wool."

"Begin," came a harsh staccato whisper in Charlie's ear.

Mechanically he snapped the switch of the small electric light which had been installed behind the lens of the machine, and then with his other hand moved the lever which controlled the clockwork mechanism. There was a hiss and splutter, a click, and then a low buzzing from the winding films. Standing by the machine Charlie stared out beyond towards the image projected upon the screen.

A large, old-fashioned bedroom was shown. It was a fine and stately place, panelled in dark wood, with a massive stone fireplace crowned by heraldic shields. In a chair by a writing-table, upon which two candles were burning, there was the motionless figure of a tall man in evening dress. His back was turned to the spectator, and only a quarter of his profile was seen. He was leaning back in the chair, obviously sleeping.

This was all very well. There was nothing in this out of the ordinary, save that the trained eye of the cinema operator noticed how complete the surroundings were. This was no "fake" room. It was the real thing.

Suddenly, from behind an old-fashioned four-

post bedstead, an extraordinary object came into the picture.

Charlie glanced at his machine furtively, and then fixed his eyes upon the screen. Why, he could not have told, but he felt an uneasiness, a certain chill.

The Thing, which advanced with hopping steps, was well under three feet high. It was unnatural, like one of those grotesque drawings which illustrate the "Inferno" of Dante.

In shape it was like a bird—indeed it might have been a vast bird with folded wings. There was the beak, the round eyes, the horrible lean neck, bare of all feathers. Nevertheless there was an uncanny suggestion that the Thing had some attributes of the human. No one knew better than Charles Penrose the infinite possibilities of the cinema. Nothing was beyond its scope. He had seen marvellous and horrible dramas with every circumstance of reality thrown upon the screen. Yet this, this hopping, hideous little object, which was slowly moving towards the sleeping figure in the chair—this affected him almost to nausea. His reason fought against the impression, but nevertheless cold dew came out

upon his forehead and he knew a nasty twinge of something not far removed from fear.

The Thing was close up to the chair. Its hideous head bent over the sleeping man. There was a convulsive, flapping movement of little feathery wings like the wings of a penguin—the figure in the chair fell forward suddenly, swayed for a moment, and then rolled upon the floor.

It was sickening, utterly sickening, for if ever sudden, unexpected death was shown, it was shown now. The man fell into death and rolled upon the floor like some horrible marionette. As if in hideous and malignant glee the dreadful, hopping Thing began an ungainly and unnatural dance. . . .

Click! The automatic closing movement had fallen. The film had come to an end.

Charlie was shaking all over when he felt his arm clutched by fingers of steel.

"There is another film to be shown," the Japanese, whose proximity he had quite forgotten, whispered in his ear.

With trembling hands Charlie lifted off the spool of the first film and handed the roll to his companion. Another was given him; he

clamped it on to the drum, ran the first blank yards through the rollers until the indicating number showed in its slot, and waited.

Again down in the hall he seemed to hear the curious scuffling movement he had noticed before. It was louder now. He could distinguish sounds of hard and stertorous breathing.

"Quick, second film!" came a hissing whisper.

Upon the screen again a room was shown; again a bedroom. It was of quite a different character from the last. There was an immense toilet table covered with mirrors, cut glass bottles, brushes—all the appurtenances of a wealthy woman's toilet. The room was lit by electric light hung from the roof. In a white bed a girl was lying asleep. Her face could not be seen, but waves of dead black hair streamed over the pillows.

Suddenly the room disappeared and a great photograph was thrown upon the screen. It was that of a young and imperially beautiful girl. Charlie had never seen anything so lovely and so fearless in his life. The contour was a perfect oval; the lips curved like a bow; under high, arched brows brave eyes, glowing with maiden pride, looked serenely forward. The head was

crowned with an immense coronet of dead black hair.

The picture went away. There was the interval of a second or two, and the bedroom once more snapped upon the eye.

Charlie had nothing to do but be sure the mechanism of his machine was rolling smoothly. His trained ear told him that without a glance. He stared at the screen with a fascination of mingled horror and excitement such as in his whole life he had never known before.

Why was it? He did not know. He had been most powerfully and unpleasantly affected by the first picture, but the photograph of that royal girl—so easily identified with that of the sleeping figure in the bed—had been almost as a spear thrust into his heart. He had no time to analyse the shock, he only knew that in a single instant his life was changed, his relations to the world swaying and falling like high walls about him, to show some unknown and unexpected vista beyond.

In the middle of the room, coming there by no obvious agency, the black Thing was standing motionless. It began to move. It began to hop towards the bed. . . .

In that very instant several things happened. There was a loud piercing shriek from the body of the hall below. Mechanically Charlie stopped the clockwork and cut off the picture. His hand was still upon the lever when the lights all over the place blazed up into yellow radiance.

In the centre of the hall the young man saw a tall girl in evening dress. She was shrieking and calling aloud in an ecstasy of fear. She was surrounded by two or three men and struggling violently with them.

For a second she wrenched herself free and turned round with a wild gesture towards the low gallery where Charlie was standing. All power of movement left him. He was frozen into a stone. For the face of the girl was the face of the picture that had been thrown upon the screen, line for line, feature for feature!

"Help!" she called. "Oh, help, for God's sake, help!"

Movement came back to Charlie's limbs. He rushed to the balcony. "I'm coming! I'm coming!" he shouted. "I'm coming to save you!"

"For God's sake, quick!" the agonised voice pealed out into the room, like a silver bell.

He gave an answering shout, and was already half-way over the low railing when he was wrenched violently away. Hands were upon his throat. Someone did something curious to a muscle in his back. He retained consciousness long enough to see that all the lights below went out suddenly, and then he felt as if he were falling through deep and icy waters as he sank into utter oblivion.

He seemed to be rushing up towards the surface of overwhelming waters. Up and up he went, with a steady throbbing, beating noise in his ears. Charlie came back to consciousness to find the swift movement no longer vertical but horizontal. He opened his eyes.

He was in the big, luxurious motor-car. The Japanese was sitting by his side and pressing crisp, crackling notes into his hand.

"The girl!" Charlie gasped. "The girl!"

"You have been very unwell," came a smooth, purring voice in answer. "I fear you have had delusions, Mr. Penrose. That is right, put those four five-pound notes in your pocket. And now——"

With a sudden jerk the motor stopped. In an

instant, before he could say another word, before he realised what was happening, strong hands took Charlie by the shoulder and he was flung reeling out into a London street.

He crashed up against a wall as the cool night air met his face. He was dimly conscious that the motor had swung round and was disappearing at a rapid pace. A policeman came up to him and eyed him suspiciously for a moment.

"Now then, young fellow," the man said, "it's late, time you were in bed. Been drinking, have you?"

Charlie shook his head. "No," he answered in a faint, but obviously sober voice, "slight giddiness, that is all. Good night, constable."

He had recognised where he was. He was standing in Oxford Street, in the ordinary London world he knew. It must be very late at night, for almost all the traffic had ceased. He staggered across the street and found himself at the top of Park Lane.

To his right were the railings of Hyde Park; to his left the huge houses of the aristocracy towered up into the November night. A late red moon was beginning to illuminate the houses

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and cast a wan glow over the leafless branches of the trees.

Hardly knowing what he did, striving to collect his thoughts, Charlie walked slowly down Park Lane.

As he approached one of the great houses a small door opened. He caught a glimpse of a brightly lit passage and a fat person in evening dress coming out upon the pavement. He was shaking hands with a much smaller man, who turned at the sound of approaching footsteps.

It was Wag Ashton!

As the two stared at each other, and Charlie's face was so white and full of horror that the other was actually trembling, a motor came humming from Piccadilly. It pulled up suddenly, four yards away from where Wag and Charlie were confronting each other.

The door flew open and a girl jumped upon the pavement as if she had been pushed. Her low cry was merged in the furious throbbing of the engine as the car dashed away and was lost to view.

There was no doubt about it! This was the girl whom Charlie had tried to rescue, how long

ago he hardly knew. This girl, who stood swaying upon the pavement with a chalk-white face, was the girl of the mysterious house. Feature for feature she was the same. Her slim hands were opening and shutting, trying to grasp at a support which was not there.

In a second Charlie was at her side, holding her from falling. Her great horror-laden eyes stared into his own.

"You! you!" she murmured. "You, the man who tried to save me!"

Charlie had no time to say a word when the front door of the mansion was flung open.

A footman rushed out, followed by a tall, brown-faced man with white hair and a heavy white moustache. A brilliant glow of orange light flooded into Park Lane. The girl tottered from Charlie's support.

"Father!" she cried. "Anthony! I've seen——"

In all his after life Charlie Penrose never forgot that most dramatic moment. There they stood, a group sharply outlined in the great blaze of light which came from the house and even turned to gold the leafless branches of the trees in the Park beyond.

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Then, as if some common impulse animated them all, they were swept into the house—the girl, her father, Charlie, Wag Ashton, and the footman.

The heavy door closed behind them and shut out the dark November night of London.

## CHAPTER II

IN a long, low-ceilinged room, panelled in white, Charlie Penrose and his friend, Wag Ashton, stood together, while the beautiful dark-haired girl told in a trembling voice of the hideous experience she had just undergone.

"As you know, father dear, I drove to the Heaths in Bryanstone Square about nine o'clock for their concert. It was delightful. Emily made me stay and have some supper, and then, I did not notice the time, the butler called a taxi-cab for me, which was going slowly round the square. I got in, and we were moving away when suddenly a man from the other side leapt in. I was too astonished for a moment to scream, and then, before I could do anything, I found myself firmly seized and something pressed into my mouth. The blinds of the cab seemed to descend immediately and it started off at a great pace. I must have fainted, for the next thing I remember is being led into that awful room I have told you about."

The girl gave a deep sob and shuddered violently.

The tall, white-haired man, who was standing by her side, held a glass of wine to her lips.

"Take a little more of this, darling," he said in a soothing voice. "Be brave and tell me all, Muriel."

The girl made a tremendous effort. Charlie, who was watching her intently, quivered with sympathy as he saw how she was fighting against an almost overmastering emotion. And when she began to speak again the young man was lost in admiration at the firmness and courage that had returned to her voice. Here indeed was a queen among girls! A fearless peerless maiden!

Already the girl had gasped out something of her story; now, her nerves somewhat calmed, she related it in detail, her father listening intently, and occasionally asking an abrupt question.

"And are you sure," he said at length, "that the room in which you saw"—his voice shook so that he could hardly go on—"in which you saw this hideous, inconceivable thing, was really your poor brother's room?"

"Detail for detail, father," she answered. "I recognised it at once. It was impossible to be mistaken."

Visible perspiration started out upon the lean, brown face of the girl's father. "And the other?" he almost whispered. "The other room, darling?"

"It was my room," she answered firmly; "no less distinct than the other. It was the blue bedroom at Ravenscroft Hall."

There was a dead silence in the room.

"Can you go on, dear?" the elderly man said at length.

"Yes, father. I managed to get the gag out of my mouth. I turned round, calling for help, and I saw this gentleman"—she looked towards Charlie. "The lights had only just been turned up," she continued, "and I saw this gentleman standing by the cinematograph machine in the low gallery. Directly I called he answered me and shouted that he was coming to rescue me. He rushed to the edge of the gallery, and was climbing over, when I saw someone leap upon him from behind and drag him away. Then all the lights went out again. I was hurried through a long, dimly lit corridor into a richly

furnished entrance hall. The gag was replaced in my mouth. I felt cool air upon my face, and was hurried into the darkened car once more with a man still by my side who held me firmly. Again the car rushed off at a great rate. We must have been going for twenty minutes at least when the gag was taken from me, the car stopped with a jerk, and I found myself here at the door of the house. The rest you know."

"I know a certain amount, Muriel," her father answered, "but"—here he wheeled round to Charlie and Ashton—"what I do not know is how these gentlemen, one of whom you tell me was actually concerned in this hideous affair, came to be standing outside my house just as the villains who abducted you drove you up."

Charlie bowed. "Allow me to explain, sir," he said, "exactly what happened as far as I am concerned."

In a simple, manly way the young man detailed the whole of his adventures, from the time he left the cinema theatre in Oxford Street until he, also, had been shot out of a taxi-cab at the top of Park Lane. His story was absolutely convincing. It was corroborated by the girl, and

the elder man held out his hand with a gesture of frank and generous thanks.

"Sir," he said, "Mr. Penrose, I owe you a great debt of thanks for what you attempted to do. My name is Vincent, Sir Philip Vincent. By some strange and extraordinary chance, your life has touched upon mine and that of my daughter at a crisis in our affairs. You will not be ignorant of a dreadful occurrence which excited England a year ago: the murder of my only son, Anthony Vincent, at my house in Yorkshire. What you unconsciously helped to show to-night seems"—one lean hand went up to Sir Philip's throat, and he struggled for words—"seems to have been the actual picture of that awful mystery which the keenest brains in England left unsolved."

Charlie gasped. "The murder," he said, "the murder of Anthony Vincent! Sir Philip, a year ago for more than a month I thought of nothing else. I knew your son, Sir Philip. We were at Harrow together. He was in the sixth form when I was only a junior boy. My guardian, a solicitor—for my father and mother died when I was a child—absconded with all my property when I was eighteen. I had no friends and no

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means of making a living. For three or four years I drifted about in various occupations until at length I became a cinematograph operator. When the awful murder was announced in the papers it came as a great shock to me. And now, good God"—Charlie reeled as the full realisation came to him—"and now I have been made the tool——" Words failed him. He covered his face with his hands.

Muriel Vincent had risen from her seat. "You knew my dear brother," Charlie heard her say.

"Command yourself, Mr. Penrose," Sir Philip said kindly, putting his hand upon the young man's shoulder. "And this gentleman?" He turned to the astonished Wag, who was standing impassively a little apart from the others. "How comes he to be here?"

Charlie shook his head. "I can't say at all," he answered, "but just as I came up to the house I saw him coming out of it by a side door. This is Mr. Ashton. We have lived together for two years and shared each other's fortunes. Mr. Ashton is a professional boxer and professor of physical culture, especially the Japanese jiu-

jitsu. He is the best and most faithful friend I ever had."

Little Wag Ashton flushed and bowed. "My presence in your house, sir," he said, "is very easily explained. My friend here knows that lately I have been"—he fidgeted with his feet and his flush grew deeper—"been—er—well, very much attracted by a young lady. That young lady is Miss Vincent's maid, Jane Gregory. This evening she consented to be engaged to me, and when I can get a home for her we hope to be married."

Sir Philip smiled kindly. He realised the situation at once. "Everything is explained," he said, and then his face changed swiftly.

He stood in the middle of the room, a tall, distinguished figure, and they saw the brown of his face turn ashen grey. Once, twice, he raised his arms shoulder high and let them fall.

"And now," he said with a hollow groan, as if speaking to himself, "they threaten my Muriel." He pressed his hands to his brow as if the thoughts within were insupportable. "The Legend," he muttered, "the Legend of the Raven. But it can't be! How can it be woven up with——"

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His voice died away into silence.

Muriel went up to her father. All the palleness had left her face. Her eyes sparkled, her lips were curved proudly.

“Father,” she said in a clear, confident voice, “what all this is I cannot guess. It may be that the mysterious and hideous agency which murdered dear Anthony was indeed the same that snatched me from a lit London street into that horrible room. Perhaps what I saw was indeed the murder of Anthony.”

She shuddered deeply. “Perhaps what I saw afterwards,” she went on, “is a foreshadowing of the way in which I am to die. But I am not afraid, I am not in the least afraid. I only ask myself this—why, why should I have been taken to see these things? There is nothing supernatural in what has occurred to-night.”

Charlie Penrose began to speak. “Of course, Sir Philip,” he said quickly, “I am an outsider in all this affair. It is only chance that has brought me into it. At the same time, if you will allow me, perhaps I may make a remark or two. I have been a cinematograph operator for nearly two years. I have shown thousands of films. I understand exactly how they are made.

You will remember, too, that I studied the accounts of Mr. Anthony Vincent's murder with great care. It is obviously quite impossible that while Mr. Vincent was actually being murdered a cinematograph film could have been taken of the dreadful event. Therefore, the film that I have shown to-night must have been a reconstruction of the murder, a faked film. That could easily have been done, provided the people who took the picture had access to your house in Yorkshire. You have not been there lately?"

"Not for three months," Sir Philip replied. "My daughter and I have been in the south of France until a week ago."

Charlie nodded. "What must have happened," he said with great decision, "is that a lay figure, made to represent your son, was set in the chair by the writing-table while the picture was being taken. As for the other—Thing," despite himself a note of horrible disgust and shrinking came into his voice, "that I do not understand. I mean to say, I do not in the least understand what it means or what significance it has in the history of the murder. But, with the resources of the modern film makers, I can assure you that such an apparition is easily pro-

duced. It seems to me, if I may venture to say so, that this cruel and hideous business to-night is meant to be a threat, a warning, or a mental torture."

Sir Philip started and drew himself up to his full height. "Sir," he said, "I thank you for these words. You have seen me unmanned for a moment. If you knew the dark mysteries in which I am entangled, you would realise that even a strong man, especially when his very dearest is in danger, may have a momentary weakness, but your words have reanimated me. You have given me courage."

Charlie bowed. He saw that Muriel Vincent was looking at him with grateful eyes. She smiled faintly.

"And so you were my dear brother's friend, Mr. Penrose?" she said softly, and her voice broke the tension.

"Hardly that, Miss Vincent," Charlie answered. "He was far too senior to me at school. He was in the eleven when I was a fag, but I remember once he gave me a severe caning, and I worshipped him for ever after."

"Muriel," her father said, "you have gone through a great strain; I still want to ask Mr.

Penrose a few questions. Don't you think you had better go to bed now?"

The girl went up to her father and kissed him. Then she held out her hand to Charlie. "You would have helped me, Mr. Penrose, if you had not been pulled down," she said sweetly; "at any rate your chance presence to-night has helped my father."

She bowed, smiled, and left the room.

As the door closed behind her, Sir Philip's manner became brisk and business-like. "Now do sit down," he said. "It is nearly two in the morning, but I am sure you won't mind talking this thing over with me?"

"Not in the least, Sir Philip," Charlie answered. And he and Wag sat down and accepted cigarettes from their host's case.

"I will ring for some whisky-and-soda," Sir Philip said. "I ought to have thought of it long ago after the strain that you have undergone. Please forgive me." He pressed an electric button in the wall.

"Now tell me," he said, beginning to walk up and down the long room, "who was this gentleman you met after you left the cinema theatre? You say he followed you, came into the res-

taurant after you, and made you a proposal. Can you give me any idea as to what he was like?"

Charlie started. "Didn't I tell you, Sir Philip?" he said. "No, of course I didn't. He was a Japanese, a Japanese who spoke English perfectly."

Sir Philip stopped in his walk. "Ah!" he said quietly, "now I know."

He had hardly said it when the door of the white-panelled room opened. The plump butler, Wag's friend, entered with a spirit tantalus and glasses upon a tray. The man was putting them down upon a table when quick footsteps were heard outside in the hall.

Sir Philip raised his head, and in a second more a short, thick-set, agile man in a black lounge suit pressed into the room.

Charlie Penrose and Wag Ashton rose from their seats in a flash.

The man was a full-blooded Japanese.

Now one Japanese is very like another to the European eye. The new-comer presented many details of likeness to the suave, fur-coated person who had lured Charlie to the unknown house. To Wag Ashton and to Charlie, in the strained

state of their nerves, he seemed exactly the same.

The little pugilist crouched down, and was preparing to rush at the man, his hands open for the first jiu-jitsu grip, when Sir Philip interposed.

"No, no!" he cried. "Don't be mistaken. This is Mr. Umataro, my personal servant and friend. I understand your agitation."

The two young men, feeling rather foolish, stared at the Japanese. As they did so they realised that there were many points of difference between him and the sinister stranger of the earlier part of the night.

Sir Philip and Umataro exchanged a sentence as the plump, impassive butler withdrew from the room and closed the door. Then the Japanese burst into a quick current of talk. His eyes flashed, his small muscular hands gesticulated; he was obviously in terrible earnest, and what he said made his master grow ashen grey once more, and sent a despairing, haunted look into his eyes.

Sir Philip made a motion of his hand, and the Japanese retired to the door, where he remained standing in impassive silence. Sir Philip turned to Charlie.

"This is a night," he said, "in which surprise succeeds surprise, and horror, horror. Mr. Penrose, never mind how I know it, but let me tell you that everything that has happened to my daughter to-night, and to you also, has taken place within three or four yards from where we stand. Incredible as it may seem to you, it occurred only next door."

Charlie gave a shout of amazement.

**"NEXT DOOR. THE OTHER SIDE OF THIS WALL"**—Sir Philip threw out one arm with a despairing gesture—"are those of whom I have not yet told you."

With a slight motion of his hand Sir Philip bade the two young men follow him. He left the room and strode out into the large entrance hall. A dying fire of wood logs still glowed pink in a great open hearth. The place was thickly carpeted; suits of strange armour stood around the walls; a wide white staircase went up to a gallery above. In all London, at that late hour, no more quiet and luxurious place could be found. It was warm, luxurious, beautiful, but there was another tenant than Sir Philip and the two young men, and that tenant was Fear.

In the very centre of the hall Sir Philip stood. The others came close to him; Umataro hovered in the background.

"You knew my son, Mr. Penrose," Sir Philip said in a very low voice; "you know who I am. You know that I was the British Ambassador to Japan until a short time ago. Fate has brought us together in an extraordinary way. You can have no doubt of my good faith. I have no doubt whatever of yours and of your friend's"—he glanced keenly at Wag Ashton. "You have told me," he continued, "that you are dismissed from your occupation, that you are both, at the present moment, in financial difficulties. I am going to make you an offer. Mr. Penrose, Mr. Ashton, you have touched the fringe of one of the great mysteries of modern times. Are you willing to go through with it? Will you enlist with me to help me and my daughter? I do not deny for a moment that dangers of which you have no conception will result on your acceptance of my offer, but you have nothing else in prospect, you are brave men, you are young, alert, strong. I am rich. Come to me, help me, save my daughter, and you need never feel the grip of insufficient means again. What do you say?"

Charlie looked at Wag. His own mind was made up, but what he saw in his little friend's face was sufficient.

He gripped Sir Philip by the hand.

"Yes," he said quietly, "from this moment onwards."

Sir Philip started just as Ashton also held out his hand. Sir Philip grasped it, and the three men stood looking at each other with a new light in the eyes of each of them.

"I can't thank you enough," Sir Philip said simply. "Of course when I made the proposal I did not know that we were all Masons. That is better than ever!"

"And now, Sir Philip?" asked Charlie.

"It is imperative," the baronet whispered, "that we flee from this house before the dawn. My daughter, her maid, my faithful Umataro, you, Ashton, and myself must leave before daylight. It will not be light until seven. By six we must be on our way to Ravenscroft Hall in Yorkshire. At a garage close by I have several motor-cars. Before the people next door"—even as he said it he shuddered again—"have any idea of our departure we shall be far upon the great high road to the north."

Wag Ashton spoke. "We had better get back to our flat at once, Charlie, and pack up a few necessaries." He took out his watch. "It is three o'clock," he said. "We can be back here by four-thirty."

"That will do very well," Sir Philip replied. "Umataro will be waiting in the hall. Ring the bell three times, wait ten seconds, and ring four times more."

Within a minute Charlie and Wag were hurrying down Park Lane. They turned into the now deserted Piccadilly and rushed towards the circus. There wasn't a taxi-cab in sight. Even the great clubs were closed, and the West End of London was empty save for the faithful patrol of the police.

They plunged up Wardour Street into Soho, their feet echoing upon the lonely pavements, their shadows dancing before them in long, oblique black grotesques as they flitted past the electric lamps.

At last they came to the tall pile of buildings where, upon the fourth floor, they had lived for two years.

All this time they had not spoken a word.

But as they slowly climbed the stone stairs

towards their flat they halted for a moment to get their breath.

"How do you feel?" Wag said suddenly.

"Better than I have ever felt in my life. There is a huge adventure in front of us. We are going into it up to our necks. We shan't turn back—shall we?"

"I rather think not," Wag replied. "Where Jane goes, I go."

"Oh, yes, Jane," Charlie said vaguely. Another name was throbbing and ringing in his mind.

When they came to the fourth floor Charlie inserted his little Yale key into the lock.

The tiny hall of the flat was in darkness. Wag flashed on the electric light. The two men shared one fairly large bedroom, and they went into it at once, flinging necessaries into a couple of kit-bags, and making the most hurried preparations for departure.

"We must keep the flat on," Charlie said when their packing was done. "We might want it. We only owe the landlord ten pounds. I'll write a letter and enclose two fivers"—he chuckled—"the enemy's money, my dear boy." And Wag Ashton gave a sardonic grin as

Charlie took out the notes that had been paid him earlier in the night.

Chuckling, they went down the passage, opened the door of their sitting-room, and switched on the light.

From an armchair in the farther corner of the room a short, broad gentleman in evening-clothes rose, as if to welcome them.

It was the man of the restaurant; it was the Japanese.

Both young men gave a loud cry of mingled alarm and surprise.

The Japanese bowed and smiled. His purplish lips had writhed up from his teeth; one hand was outstretched, and the electric light shown upon the blue barrel of an automatic pistol.

"So pleased to meet you again," the man said in a mocking, snarling voice. "So you are now friends of Sir Philip Vincent, the late ambassador to my country. You have been packing up. You really think, gentlemen, that you are going to Yorkshire?"

Charlie found words first. "You devil," he said, "how do you know what——"

"Well," the other answered, the muzzle of his pistol pointing straight at Charlie's heart, "since you were told that your little experience of tonight took place next door to Sir Philip Vincent's house in Park Lane, surely a young man of your intelligence is able to realise that party walls are not very thick; and that means of overhearing conversations between one house and another can be easily arranged by those with an object in view?"

Charlie grew very white as he leant against the wall.

The muzzle of the pistol shifted an inch.

"In three seconds," the Japanese remarked blandly, "you are farther than Yorkshire, Mr. Penrose."

The prolonged and terrible strain of the night's adventures culminated now as if in one swift stroke. Charlie leant against the wall, limp, powerless. All energy and will had left him. He waited the end of it all.

The Japanese smiled cruelly, and took accurate aim at his adversary's heart.

But he had reckoned without Wag Ashton. The little pugilist had crouched low without

a single movement. He had drawn near to the sneering, yellow fiend with almost imperceptible advance; simultaneously with the flash and explosion of the pistol Wag was on the top of the Japanese.

A frightful silent struggle began, as Charlie—quite unhurt—staggered away from the wall. The Japanese was an expert in the wonderful system of self-defence known as jiu-jitsu, but now he had met his match. Ashton was younger, quicker, and in better training, as the two swayed and wrestled upon the floor in deadly silence, only broken by their deep and laboured breathing. Wag remembered every detail of his long apprenticeship in jiu-jitsu.

A sudden blow upon the small bones of the hand loosened the grip of the Japanese upon the pistol. The man's arm was instantly seized and twisted into a position of almost unendurable pain. Wag's head was pressed against the man's groin with the whole weight of his body—it was the celebrated "7th movement." The little pugilist's right hand pulled away his opponent's leg just behind the ankle. In three seconds more Wag was spread-eagled over his antagonist, and

the Japanese was limp, powerless, and groaning in agony.

"Now then, Charlie, be quick," Wag said breathlessly. "Get that coil of wire the telephone people left behind last week."

Charlie got it.

Under Wag's direction he wound the thick wire round the ankles of the Japanese. The man was turned upon his back and his wrists were bound until it was impossible for him to free them.

All this was carried out in dead silence. It was Charlie that broke it. "You gagged Miss Vincent," he said fiercely as he pressed a handkerchief twisted into a ball into the captive's mouth and secured it by a silk scarf bound tightly round his head. "You dared to ill-treat an English lady—to say nothing of the mental torture to which you subjected her. I think, Mr. ——, whatever your name may be, that we are now more than quits."

At Wag's suggestion Charlie searched the man, tumbling everything that came from his pockets into one of the kit-bags that still remained open.

"You will lie here for another twenty-four hours," Charlie said, "and if you are alive at the end of that time you will be released owing to a letter I am about to post. And if you cross my path again—then, God help you!"

"Same here," said Wag Ashton quietly, as the two went out of the sitting-room and closed the door upon the gagged, wire-bound figure upon the floor.

They locked the door of the flat and carried their bags down to the street. As luck would have it, they found a cab, the driver of which, half asleep, was droning home to the garage. As they got into it and gave the address in Park Lane, Wag spoke.

"Do you think he'll die, Charlie?" he asked.

"Not a bit of it," the other replied. "He is as tough as a whip cord. He'll have a bad time, of course, and he deserves it. Don't let's think about him. We have escaped another great danger and now we take up our new duties. We go to protect Sir Philip Vincent and his daughter from terrible foes."

Wag nodded. As far as he was concerned, there was another pretty girl in the case upon whom his thoughts were fixed.

In less than five minutes the friends arrived at the tall dark house in Park Lane. As they dismissed their cab and pressed the bell button both of them looked curiously at the adjoining house upon the right which towered up, black, sinister, and lifeless, by the side of Sir Philip Vincent's mansion.

Within an hour two large closed touring cars, followed by another crowded with luggage, slid noiselessly down Park Lane, just as the November dawn was beginning to break over London.

Hardly anyone was yet abroad; the market carts from distant suburbs were lumbering down Piccadilly towards Covent Garden. Here and there a sleepy policeman stood upon point duty round about Hyde Park Corner.

Two hours afterwards, as the three luxurious cars were rushing swiftly up the Great North Road towards Yorkshire and the moors, they carried a stranger burden than the village wayfarers who saw them pass ever dreamed of.

The Spirit of Fear accompanied that swift flight through the fresh morning air. And within strong determination an armed and watchful

policy, a high spirit of courage and adventure, reigned.

And more than all these, tremulous, hesitating, halting Love was born.

So they whirled up to the north.

## CHAPTER III

IT was just seven o'clock. A full moon was rising over the city of York. The night was cold, but windless and clear, as little Wag Ashton strolled out of the big stable yard of the famous old Saracen's Head Hotel, went under the archway, and with a cigar in the corner of his mouth surveyed the quiet street of the old cathedral city.

Nearly two hours ago the three great motor-cars had arrived at York. They had stopped twice only, once at Leicester and once at Sheffield. Now the cars were in the great yard of the hotel, Sir Philip Vincent and his daughter were dining with Charlie Penrose, and Wag, having finished his own meal, had come out for a breath of the night air before the journey was continued. He understood that in two hours after their leaving York they would arrive at Sir Philip's great house upon the moors.

The little man was happy. The extraordinary occurrences of the last twenty-four hours had in-

tered him enormously. His adventurous disposition was pleased and thrilled. For a time at any rate the days of inactivity and poverty seemed over. His philosophy was quite simple. Where Charlie Penrose led, Wag Ashton would follow to the death, for he loved and admired his friend more than any other man in the world. The future, whatever it might bring forth, was sure to be full of excitement. And, more than all else, Wag would be constantly in the society of pretty, graceful Jane Gregory, whom he had lately learned to love, and to whom, only the night before, he had become engaged.

All the long rush through England—the flight from unknown perils—he had occupied a car alone with Charlie. The two had talked out the situation very thoroughly, and had resolved to stick to Sir Philip and his daughter whatever might befall. Wag had insisted on one thing.

"You are a public schoolman," he said; "if your guardian hadn't absconded with all your money you'd have been always mixing with people like the Vincents. Now, though you are my best friend and I know I am yours, I come of good country yeoman stock. I don't admit that that stock is inferior to any other in the

world, but class is class, and when things happen like they are happening now, they have got to be preserved."

"I don't quite see what you are driving at, Wag," Charlie had said.

"No? Well, it is very simple. I am engaged to Miss Vincent's maid. Jane is the daughter of old Tom Gregory, the well-known actor who has fallen on bad days lately. I love her, and we are going to be married. But when we get to Ravenscroft Hall the housekeeper's room will be my place, the dining-room yours. We shall see just as much of each other as ever, and I shall always be at your orders in the disentangling of this horrid mystery."

Charlie had protested, but he saw that his friend spoke words of wisdom. It had been arranged thus, much to Wag's satisfaction.

Wag's cigar was nearly finished. He watched the big shops putting up their shutters. He had enjoyed an excellent meal; he felt happier than he had done for years, while the pleasant sense and risk and adventure tingled in his veins.

He was just determining to go back to the yard and have a chat with McHenry, the head

chauffeur, when he heard the loud, long-drawn-out toot of an approaching motor.

The noise was insistent, and in a second or two a deep throbbing pulsated through the clear night air, rapidly rising to a humming roar.

Then a very large closed touring car, of sixty or seventy horse-power at least, dead black in colour, and with the blinds of the interior all drawn, flashed past the hotel at a great speed. The little boxer had time to see that the car was covered with mud and dust. From the pace it was going it was obviously only passing through the city, and indeed the long bellow of the horn was insistent until it finally died away in the distance. It was like standing in some little way-side station and seeing the North Express thunder past.

Wag did not have his little chat with the head chauffeur after all. He became very thoughtful and quiet, and when, half an hour afterwards, the three cars started again upon the last stage of their journey, he leant back in his corner and said very little.

Charlie was in high spirits. He had dined with Sir Philip and his daughter. The ex-Ambassador had consulted him upon various

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points, had made himself thoroughly friendly, and given the young man to understand that he relied upon him absolutely.

"When we arrive," Charlie said, "I am going to sit up with Sir Philip, and he is going to tell me everything, so that we can be well prepared. From what he has already said, old chap, I can see that there is a task before us which will call for every possible exercise of our brains—perhaps our muscles also."

"That is when I shall come in," Wag remarked dryly.

Without any doubt whatever there are the gravest dangers before us, but we'll conquer them, won't we? We'll save Sir Philip and—and—his daughter!"

Wag smiled quietly to himself in the darkness of the car. He recognised certain symptoms in his friend's voice. He hadn't been unmindful of the almost reverence with which Charlie treated the beautiful, dark-haired girl. Well, so much the better, the boxer thought to himself. It made the whole affair more interesting than ever.

At last he spoke. "Of course, Charlie," he said slowly, "we have been very clever in tying

up that murderous Japanese—I suppose by now the landlord will have your letter and he will be released. Of course he daren't lay any information against us under the circumstances. It was pretty smart, I admit, but when you come to think of it, the other side—whoever they are—were pretty smart too in overhearing part of what went on between Sir Philip and us in Park Lane. If it hadn't been for what Umataro discovered, we should never have suspected for a moment that the house where you were taken and Miss Vincent decoyed was only the next door one to her father's."

"I admit all you say," Charlie replied, "but I don't quite see what you are driving at."

"I am coming to that," Wag said. "These people are a long, long way smarter than we imagine. I should not at all be surprised if, when we get to Ravenscroft Hall, we shall find—in some way or other, I don't pretend to say how—that our friends are there before us."

Charlie laughed outright. "My dear Wag," he said, "that is preposterous. Nobody could have known where we were going. Nobody saw us go. Even the train service has been looked up."

"Now just you listen to me," Wag cut in, and in a few crisp sentences he told him of the enormous black car which had rushed through York half an hour ago.

"It may be so," Charlie said thoughtfully. "We must keep all our wits about us. It is certainly a curious coincidence."

The moon was flooding the vast expanse of the Yorkshire moors with washes of silver light when the cars mounted a steep, winding road to where a huge black mass of building stood alone among the heather.

They had come to their destination at last.

As they got out of their car Wag and Charlie surveyed a long, low, battlemented pile, with towers at each corner, and a huge entrance door barred with massive, iron-studded oak.

There was some little delay before the great entrance doors were opened, and as the friends stood together looking at their new home, both of them were conscious of a slight chill, a fleeting apprehension at a place so grand and solitary.

The doors opened at length, and an elderly caretaker, together with his wife and a son of some twenty years of age, stood bowing beneath

the archway. Umataro, the Japanese valet, Brice, the butler, and Jane Gregory, Muriel's maid—who had all travelled down in the third motor-car—became busied with the luggage.

Sir Philip, his daughter, Charlie, and Wag crossed a moonlit quadrangle bounded on all sides by tall buildings, and entered a postern door at the farther end.

The caretaker and his wife had followed them, and as they entered a wide, carpeted corridor, the walls hung with ancient, faded pictures, the whole place leapt up into radiance. The electric light had been installed at Ravenscroft Hall several years before, and the staff of household and outdoor servants were always maintained there, for Sir Philip Vincent was apt to visit his ancestral home at short notice, and required everything to be in readiness when he came.

A couple of fresh-cheeked, smiling housemaids conducted the members of the party to their various rooms. A telegram earlier in the day had prepared the people of Ravenscroft for the influx of visitors. Conducted up more than one staircase, down several twisting corridors, Charlie and Wag Ashton found them-

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selves at length installed in a suite of three rooms.

The middle of these was a comfortable sitting-room, with a pleasant fire burning upon the hearth. A bedroom opened into the sitting-room on each side.

Their baggage came up in a minute or two, carried by a groom, and Brice, the butler, followed him.

"These are your quarters, gentlemen," said the butler. "You are in the north wing, which is the wing inhabited by the family. There are electric lights in both bedrooms, and also one here by the side of the fire."

"I am sure we shall be very comfortable," Charlie replied, looking round the large, old-fashioned room with its shuttered windows, over which heavy crimson curtains were drawn, its roomy old chairs and settees, its general air of hospitality and home.

"I hope so, sir, I am sure," the butler replied. "I am telling off a young fellow to attend to you; it's Jim Waddington, one of the grooms. He is not too clever, Mr. Penrose, but he is as staunch as steel."

Charlie looked keenly at the big, fat man.

Brice nodded. "Yes, sir," he answered, "I know something of it all. Your life here is not going to be any pleasure party. It is a strange, mournful old house. Only this wing is inhabited. My master trusts me, and though I don't know everything——"

The butler said no more, but shrugged his shoulders.

Charlie took to the faithful old fellow at once. "Well, Mr. Brice," he said, "if you know so much, you know why I and Mr. Ashton have been asked down here by Sir Philip."

"I do," the other answered solemnly, "and I pray God that you two young gentlemen will be able to guard my dear master and our young lady from all that threatens them."

"We shall do our best," Charlie replied in the same earnest voice.

"I am sure you will, sir," said the butler, "and as for Mr. Ashton here"—his face lit up with hope and approval—"we have known each other for several weeks. And what Mr. Ashton can't do in the way of circumventing anything that may be going along, nobody else can do. Of that I am dead certain, Mr. Penrose."

Wag thrust his arm into the butler's, nodding and winking at Charlie as he did so.

"Now I am off," he said, "to take a little supper in the housekeeper's room with Mr. Brice, Miss Gregory, and the rest of them. I shall be up here again at eleven o'clock. I understand that your interview with Sir Philip will be a long one. While I am at supper I am going to get information from Mr. Brice, and make a rough plan of this wing of the house. I shall bring that plan up here and leave it on the table. I do not think I shall sleep in one of these bedrooms to-night, but my plan will tell you where I am in case you want me."

The little boxer spoke in a bright and almost jaunty voice, but there was no gaiety in his eyes, and he looked meaningly at his friend.

Charlie did not quite understand what was meant, but nodded, knowing that Wag was speaking with a motive.

As the pugilist and the butler left the room, the latter turned. "I am going at once to Sir Philip, sir," Brice said, "and directly he is ready one of the maids will come for you."

Charlie was left alone in the brilliantly lit

suite. He opened both the bedroom doors, and surveyed every nook and cranny of the rooms. They were low-ceilinged and obviously ancient apartments. The furniture was solid and comfortable, but about all of them there was a certain atmosphere of being far away from the ordinary world. All the tall, pointed windows were heavily barred and shuttered, as he ascertained when he pulled aside the thick hanging curtains. There was not a sound to be heard save the crackling of the great wood fire upon the hearth of the sitting-room.

Charlie began to pace up and down the whole suite, from one bedroom, through the sitting-room, to the end of the other bedroom. They were all brightly lit by hanging pendants; everything was as snug and comfortable upon this cold November night as any traveller could wish. And yet, as he walked, he felt a strong sense of depression falling over his spirits. It was not depression perhaps so much as apprehension. He reviewed the extraordinary and inexplicable occurrences of the immediate past. He could see no light anywhere. He knew, with an inward certainty and intuition which did not in the least depend upon actual occurrences, but

which came to him as a sinister and warning message of the night, that his life had now arrived at a crucial, a test point.

Great black walls of horror were closing round him. He was alone against unknown forces. He had taken up the leadership in a mysterious battle. He had a friend, alert, capable, watchful, to aid him. Wag Ashton was, as it were, a keen, sharp dagger at his belt; but in his right hand—what was there? Had he a sword naked and ready for this fight?

In those silent, luxurious rooms, as he paced them up and down, there was no immediate answer to his self-questioning.

Yet suddenly he stopped short and threw out his right arm. He knew now. A girl's appealing, tortured face, an agonised cry for help rang in his ears still. Kind glances, wide eyes full of eager hope claiming protection, came into his mental vision and struck, as it were, a chord of strong music in his heart.

Yes, this was his sword! He grasped it now. The Fates had sent him to be the knight and protector of Muriel!

He would do it. Come what might he would save her and her gallant father.

He did not hear the tap at the passage door, and when it opened and he saw a trim house-maid looking at him with startled eyes, he realised that he was flourishing his right arm with wild gestures.

He flushed deeply as the astonished girl told him that Sir Philip requested his presence below.

He followed the housemaid down one long corridor, a short staircase, another long corridor in the centre of which was a door, opened by the girl, another short staircase, a three yard passage, and then through an open door into a small room panelled in old oak with a high, carved fireplace, by the side of which Sir Philip Vincent was sitting.

The baronet wore a velvet smoking-suit. He was sitting by an octagonal table, upon which was a silver soup tureen and a couple of small silver bowls.

“Sit down, Penrose,” Sir Philip said. “Here we are at last—in Ravenscroft. Take some soup and then fill your pipe or have a cigarette. Since you have enlisted yourself in the service of my daughter and myself you must hear everything.”

The soup was taken, a cigarette or two

smoked, and then the tall, white-haired man rose from his seat, and, walking up and down the room, spoke to Charlie as follows:

"First of all, Penrose, you and your clever little friend have come into my affairs quite by accident. I know who you are. You were at school with my poor dear son. You answer for your friend, and I myself am certain of him. In addition, we are all three brethren, and I need not enlarge upon what Freemasonry means in every degree of life. I found you and Mr. Ashton hard up, at the end of your resources. I have invited you to help me in one of the blackest and most mysterious businesses that exist in Europe at present. Before I go any further I must say something about emolument."

Charlie shook his head and made a deprecating movement.

"No," the other replied, "we must have some understanding. I may tell you that I am one of the richest men of the day. Money is simply nothing at all to me—and yet it is, if I can only use my great wealth for England. That, Mr. Penrose, is what I am trying to do."

He stopped in his walk, threw his cigar into the fire, plunged his hands into his pockets, and

stared down at Charlie with kindly, trusting, and anxious eyes.

"Look here," he said, "the period of danger which threatens us all will be terminated in five or six months. During that time we may all be disgraced and murdered by the most subtle and unexpected means. I put it at six months —that is the outside. If we come through these six months, successful and unharmed, I will give you thirty thousand pounds, and your friend, Mr. Ashton, ten thousand. Will that do?"

Charlie, who was sitting by the fire, lifted the poker and plunged it into the blaze. "Oh yes," he said in a cold voice, "that will do very well, Sir Philip."

Sir Philip stepped up to the young man and placed his hand upon his shoulder. "I beg your pardon," he said quietly. "I would not have asked you to come and help me in my trouble had I not felt from the first that you were with me heart and soul. We will talk about money afterwards."

Charlie looked up brightly and clasped his host by the hand. "That is what I wanted, Sir

Philip," he said, "and now then—to business. Tell me!"

"You know that I was His Majesty's Ambassador to Japan?"

"Yes, Sir Philip."

"In those days I was a bachelor. I had a friend, a very dear friend. It was Lord Helston, Viscount Helston. We had been at Harrow and Oxford together. He was a man of some wealth, extraordinary talent, but of a wild and erratic disposition. He became an explorer, turned up in the wildest parts of the world, writing brilliant accounts of what he had seen, attracting all London by his wild brilliance, and then disappearing once more. When I was appointed Ambassador to Japan, Henry Helston turned up. He presumed upon our old friendship. I soon found I could not trust him. He had little or no feeling for the interests of England in that far country.

"Then," Sir Philip continued in a slower voice, and with eyes that seemed to be searching the dim past, "then the lady who afterwards became my wife arrived in Japan. She was a very beautiful and very wealthy girl, Penrose, going with her father upon a tour round the

world in a great yacht. Henry Helston fell madly in love with her. I did the same. I was the more fortunate of the two, and Beatrice and I were married. There was a dreadful scene between Lord Helston and myself. After that he disappeared. But I had news of him. He spoke the language like a Japanese. He became attached to the court of the Mikado. I always felt his influence against me in all my negotiations on behalf of this country. Eventually he married a Japanese princess of the Imperial family, and there was one son born, the present Lord Helston."

Charlie started violently. "The present Lord Helston?" he said, "the peer that there is such an astonishing mystery about? Why, nobody has ever seen him, so the papers say. He has never taken his seat in the House of Lords. The papers are constantly referring to him. I have read all sorts of articles myself."

Sir Philip nodded. "I may tell you," he replied with a slight but perceptible shudder, "that the empty house next to my house in Park Lane was recently taken by this very Lord Helston, under circumstances of great secrecy. It was in Lord Helston's house, Mr. Penrose, that you

showed that film of horror. It was to Lord Helston's house that my daughter was abducted last night."

Charlie's eyes blazed with excitement. He rose from his seat trembling.

"Then?" he gasped, "then, Sir Philip?"

"There is an implacable enmity between the houses of Helston and Vincent. After a long period of security, thinking that after the death of the late lord all accounts between us were over, I have lately been made aware that the present Lord Helston, whoever or whatever that mysterious person may be, is actively engaged against me. Mr. Penrose"—and here Sir Philip's voice sank into a hoarse whisper—"I most firmly believe that my dear son, with whom you were at school, was murdered in some awful, inexplicable way by the hidden, enigmatic person of whom I have been speaking."

"But why, Sir Philip?" Charlie cried. "Why should there be this awful feud between your house and Lord Helston's?"

"I am coming to that," the other answered. "There is, of course, the feud handed on by the late Viscount to his son. And in connection with that I have had some most strange and disturb-

ing thoughts. The present Lord Helston, whom nobody has ever seen, must be half Japanese. You must remember his mother was a princess of the Imperial Court. Perhaps that is why no one knows anything about him in England, or has ever seen him.

“Yet I have heard rumours and whispers, of which I will tell you later, that seem to even augment this family hatred. In addition to that—and here I come to the most secret and important thing of all—there are circumstances connected with the life of my son, Anthony Vincent, and with his cruel murder, which may yet shake two great nations to their very foundations.”

Sir Philip hesitated.

“What you say to me, sir,” Charlie broke in, “is as safe and secret as if in the grave.”

Sir Philip got up from his chair and went to one of the long windows of the room. With one hand, upon a finger of which was a curious signet ring of twisted gold, he tore aside a heavy silk curtain. Then with quick, trembling fingers he unbarred the shutters, revealing a long Oriel window. Outside a brilliant moon showed everything in clearest detail. It washed the heather

with floods of silver; it showed a vast expanse of lonely moor. But it showed also, a little to the right, and hardly more than a mile away, the grim keep and walls of a feudal castle etched into the sky in a dead black silhouette.

"You see that house?" Sir Philip murmured, "that is Helston Castle itself. I own half the moor—some twenty thousand acres—the unknown Lord Helston the other half. His house is close to mine, as you see—what is to come of it all? Helston Castle! Ravenscroft Hall!" the old man continued in a low, vibrating voice. "You must know, Mr. Penrose, that there is a tradition in the Vincent family that whenever disaster is approaching any member of it the spectre of an enormous raven is seen."

"The pictures!" Charlie gasped.

"Yes, the cinema pictures," Sir Philip replied; "but you yourself have told me how possible it is that such an apparition could be 'faked.' Nevertheless the thing has been done: our old ancestral legend has been revived to terrify us. It may well be that my dear son met his death in some such a way as was cruelly shown to my daughter by your unconscious help."

"Then you think?"

"I don't think, I *know*. It is from the man or Thing called Helston that these horrors emanate. It is because of him that you and your friend have joined me to guard my only daughter and myself from some hideous catastrophe, and England itself from red war which would end in terrible disaster."

"You're going to explain to me now, aren't you, Sir Philip, the international side of this mystery, in addition to the personal side?"

"Let us shut and bar the window and pull the curtain, then you shall know everything."

They pulled the heavy shutter over the window and locked it.

Sir Philip had his hand upon the curtain, when, without a sound of warning, the electric light in the room behind went out.

The two men turned swiftly and stared into the dark.

It was like black velvet, save only that in one corner there was the red glow of the dying wood fire.

Suddenly Charlie, with a loud cry of anger and pursuit, leapt into the middle of the room, dodged round the table, and was brought up with a loud bang against the panelling. He

had felt a breath of cool air blowing into the place. He had heard, or thought he had heard, the sound of soft footsteps over the carpet.

Even as he beat with his clenched fists against the wall the light leapt up again.

The room was the same as before. Nothing was disturbed or changed, but on the table was a large, square envelope upon which was written "To SIR PHILIP VINCENT, Bt., C.M.G."

Their faces blanched to a dead whiteness, the two men stared at each other over the table.

"You see," Sir Philip began to stammer and whisper. He was trying to recover some equanimity, when the door in the other corner of the room, leading into the corridor, burst open.

There was the sudden ear-splitting explosion of a pistol, and Wag Ashton, as white as Charlie and Sir Philip, staggered into the room.

He was supporting the white-robed figure of Muriel Vincent upon his left arm, and glaring down the passage, his pistol raised, a thin whip of grey smoke curling up into the air.

## CHAPTER IV

SIR PHILIP VINCENT and Charlie Penrose stood aghast as the sound of the pistol shot died away.

They rushed up to Wag Ashton, and caught the half-fainting Muriel from his arm.

Directly he was free of her the little pugilist bolted back up the passage like a terrier—they heard his feet padding down the corridor, the quick opening of a door, and then silence.

Sir Philip carried his daughter tenderly towards the fire and placed her in a great leather armchair. Upon a table at one side of the smoking-room, there were, fortunately enough, a tantalus and some glasses. At a nod from Sir Philip Charlie poured out a little brandy and water, which was held to the lips of the fainting girl. She drank it obediently and a slight colour came back into her cheeks.

“What is it, dearest?” Sir Philip said in a low, caressing voice, kneeling by the side of

the chair and holding the girl's hands firmly.  
“What is it?”

“IT!” Muriel murmured, her voice a whisper of sheer horror. “The Raven, father! The awful Thing I saw in London, it came into my room. I had turned out the light but it suddenly blazed up, and I saw that frightful Thing hopping over the floor towards me.”

Muriel was seized with strong, convulsive shudderings, she sobbed and moaned in terror, and for another minute or two was quite unable to say a word. At length her father's soothing voice, his firm protective grip of her hands, calmed her somewhat. The rest of what she had to tell was simple.

“I shrieked out in horror,” she whispered. “I had not thought of locking my door, and almost a second after I called out it burst open and Mr. Ashton rushed in with a pistol in his hand. He jumped at the awful black Thing, but somehow or other he must have missed it. The light went out again and I think I fainted. The next thing I know is that Mr. Ashton was helping me here, and that he raised his pistol and fired at something in the passage.”

Up till this moment Charlie Penrose had been

perfectly inactive. He realised this with a quick flash of shame. Here was his friend adequate and alert, watchful in this house of danger, while he himself had done nothing. Muriel—so Charlie thought with a pang of horror—Muriel might have been murdered if it had not been for Ashton. He forgot the necessity for a long conference with Sir Philip. His young and generous blood grew hot to think he had not been ready to rescue the girl in the moment of her need. He was distinctly envious of Wag, and oblivious of the fact that when the light had gone out in the smoking-room he himself had dashed through the dark towards some unknown adversary.

Jane Gregory, the lady's maid, hurried into the room. A dressing-gown was thrown over her nightdress. Her hair, like that of her mistress, fell unconfined over her shoulders. Her pretty face was flushed with excitement and her eyes shone.

"Oh, Miss Muriel," she cried, "thank God you are safe! Mr. Ashton has just knocked me up from the other end of the passage and told me that something has happened. Oh, thank God you are all right, Miss Muriel!"

The girl rushed up to her mistress, whom she loved, and began to be busy about the chair where Muriel reclined, pushing Sir Philip away and whispering consoling words to the pale, dark-haired lady.

Seeing his opportunity Charlie Penrose stole away out of the room. He hurried up the passage, turned to the right, and saw an open door from which a stream of light flooded into the corridor. He dashed in.

Wag Ashton was there, his automatic pistol in his left hand, stooping, crouching, moving hither and thither, tapping the wall at various places and listening intently for an answering echo—he was like a small, methodical sleuth-hound fixed upon a trail.

He whipped round like a startled ferret as Charlie entered.

"Ah, it is you," he said with a gasp of relief.

"What is it, Wag? What has happened? I am in the dark. I was sitting with Sir Philip hearing the most extraordinary things, when suddenly you rushed into the room with Miss Vincent."

Wag stood up with a final gaze round the room.

"I don't pretend to say, old chap," he answered, "but I am blowed if I wasn't right about that big black motor-car that rushed at such a pace through York. They, whoever they are, got here before us, and Miss Vincent has been nearly frightened out of her life. She might have lost it—I don't know anything about that, but it is certain that the filthy, hopping creature has been in this room to-night. When you went to talk with Sir Philip I took a rug and lay down in the passage outside Miss Vincent's room. I thought it was the safest thing to do, I felt very uneasy in my mind. As it turns out, I was right."

"You were right a thousand times," Charlie answered eagerly. "Wag, you have been more wide awake than I. I ought to have been waiting here to protect her."

Wag gave a queer little smile. "We are both in this, Charlie," he said. "I don't see why you any more than me. Besides, you were on another job." He looked Charlie so straight in the face that the other blushed furiously.

But Wag saw the youthful blush fade and disappear. He saw his friend's eyes light up with recognition as they roved round the room. Then he saw startled fear come into them.

"What is it?" Wag said quickly. "What's the matter?"

"The room!" Charlie gasped. "This is the room that I showed upon the film. Look!" He threw out his hand towards a great dressing-table covered with costly toilet apparatus, towards a chintz settee at the foot of a white bed, the clothes of which were tumbled in disorder. Two portraits hung upon the wall. Yes! it was the same room, the very same.

In a few swift sentences he explained everything to his friend.

Wag shrugged his shoulders. "No place for a young lady to sleep in, that is quite clear," he said. "Of course, Charlie, it is all part of this desperate game which we are here to find out about. I have made a quick examination of the walls and the floor of this place and I have found out nothing. To-morrow morning we will have some men up here and see what a few hatchets and chisels can discover. Then there is the other room, too, we must examine—that room you told me about where you saw what appeared to be the murder of Mr. Anthony Vincent. Perhaps we shall discover his Nibs himself."

"What do you mean?" Charlie asked.

"Why, isn't it obvious," the pugilist replied, "that there is some human agency at work? This Thing, this Raven isn't any ghost at all. Ancestral ghosts don't stab healthy young men in the neck. They don't make perceptible noises as they hop about rooms; and if my aim had been a little nearer in the corridor just now, I think we should know a great deal more about the whole matter than we do at present."

"Yes!" Charlie cried, "you fired down the corridor just as you brought Miss Vincent into the smoking-room?"

"I did," Ashton replied coolly, "because I saw something small and black flitting along it—or thought I did."

Charlie groaned. "I wish I had your coolness, Wag," he said; "but there is something very, very wrong with this house."

"Of course there is, old boy," the other answered cheerfully, "but don't get in a stew about it. Now suppose we go back to the room where Sir Philip and his daughter are. There won't be any more sleeping for most of us to-night, and if you ask me"—here the little man's jaunty voice took on a note of seriousness—"if you ask me I think we must still be on our guard well

until dawn. We must be prepared for anything."

Walking quickly and silently the two young men returned to the smoking-room. Charlie tapped at the door which was closed.

There was the click of a key in the lock, and Sir Philip stood before them.

"Ah, it is you, gentlemen," he said, "come in, come in."

As they entered they saw that Muriel Vincent was still sitting by the fire, covered with a great fur rug which had been taken from a settee. Jane Gregory sat upon a footstool at her side. Sir Philip locked the door and then caught Wag Ashton by the hand.

"Sir," he said, "you have probably saved my daughter's life. Knowing what we knew, it was criminal of me to take no precautions, but I thought I should be safe here in my own house for to-night."

With tears in his eyes, the distinguished old man dropped the other's hand and placed his own upon Wag's shoulder.

Wag was obviously very much embarrassed. "It was nothing, Sir Philip," he said, "only it occurred to me that Miss Muriel ought to be

protected in some way, and so I arranged to sleep in the passage outside her room. But don't let us talk about that, Sir Philip, the point is that Miss Muriel must be guarded absolutely for the rest of the night. How are we to do it?"

During the whole of the evening Charlie Penrose had felt how inadequate he was compared to his clever and effective friend. He had been, as it were, in a dream. Yet his intellect was more acute and far more imaginative than that of his friend. Lost in surmise as to the mysteries surrounding the Vincent family—mysteries which were already half revealed to him by Sir Philip—he had neglected immediate precautions. But he became practical now.

"How would this do, Sir Philip?" he said hurriedly. "Wag and I have been put into a suite of three rooms. There is a sitting-room in the middle and a bedroom on each side. Surely they will be safe?"

"God knows," the baronet answered, "what room in my house is safe to-night or at any other time."

"I think those rooms will be all right," Charlie replied in a brisk and business-like voice. "Miss Muriel must be protected; you have more to tell

me also. What I propose is this: Let Miss Vincent and Jane sleep in one of the rooms of our suite. The door leading into the sitting-room shall be open. You and I and Mr. Ashton will remain in the centre room, the lights shall be turned on—yes, the electric lights shall be on, but we will also provide ourselves with lamps and candle, for it is obvious the electric light can and has been tampered with, both in Miss Muriel's room and”—he looked meaningfully at Sir Philip, and then down upon the central table of the room where a large square envelope lay—“and elsewhere.”

“You are right, Penrose,” the baronet answered. “Let us leave this place without a moment's delay. Muriel, my dear,” he continued in a louder voice, “all your troubles are over. We are going to take you somewhere where you will be perfectly safe. I and our two friends will be within a few yards. Jane, help your mistress to the three rooms at the end of the north wing.”

Wag Ashton dived into the side pocket of his crumpled lounge suit. He produced an electric torch—one of those practical and useful little flashlights which one can buy anywhere for a few

shillings. "I'll go with you, Sir Philip," he said, "if you will lead the way. I am a little doubtful about these corridors and staircases, and if anybody tries to play hanky-panky with the lights, well, I have got something here that won't fail us."

As they all left the smoking-room together Charlie saw Wag's hand steal behind him, and the automatic Browning came into stealthy view.

They passed along the corridor where Muriel's bedroom, with its open door, still blazed with light. They passed the room of the maid on the other side. That door also was open and the lights were on. Within a couple of minutes they had gone up two short flights of stairs, turned and twisted among the intricate passages of the old house, and had arrived at the little suite of rooms set apart for Charlie and his friend.

The big central sitting-room was calm and quiet. The fire still blazed upon the hearth. There was no appearance of anyone having entered at all. The two bedrooms were thoroughly examined, but presented no unusual features. As Muriel and her maid took possession of the bedroom on the left and sank into a tired sleep, they felt—as their protectors also felt—that here

at least they were safe from hideous apparitions, spectral visitations, or the revengeful “terror that flieth by night.”

The three men sat down in armchairs in front of the fire, upon which Charlie threw a couple of logs. They spoke in low tones, as the door leading into the room where the two girls were sleeping was left ajar.

“What I want to ask you, Sir Philip,” Wag said, “if you will allow me, is this: Where is my friend, Mr. Brice, the butler? Where are the other domestics, and where, especially, is your own valet and body servant, the Japanese Umataro?”

Sir Philip’s face grew grey at this last question.

“This is a great house,” he replied. “Even this north wing which we are now inhabiting, Mr. Ashton, is larger than most country houses. Brice has a room down in the quadrangle, where the caretaker and the maids sleep. To-morrow, of course, a couple of footmen will come down. The three chauffeurs are also sleeping on the ground floor. Brice knows something of my private affairs. The others know nothing; but Umataro knows it all!” The quiet voice—a voice

which had nevertheless suddenly begun to shake with excitement—died away.

In the fireplace a log began to crackle and sparkle; from the bedroom beyond came a deep sigh from one of the two girls who were sleeping there.

"You see, sir," Wag said at length and in a low whisper, "I don't know everything yet. All I know is that the people who are against us are somehow or other Japanese. Charlie has heard a good deal from you to-night, but I have heard nothing yet. So you will pardon me if I have said anything wrong. I can't help wondering where Umataro can be."

"I would stake my life on his fidelity, Mr. Ashton," the old man said.

Wag nodded. "I am sure," he said dryly; "but while all this has been going on—where is he?"

It was Charlie who grasped the situation, and saw that Wag must be immediately acquainted with all that he himself had heard from Sir Philip.

With an almost imperious gesture of his hand to the elder man, Charlie poured the story of the Helston Vincent feud into his friend's ears.

Wag now heard everything from the beginning: when Sir Philip was Ambassador to Japan and the quarrel about the lady who afterwards became Sir Philip's wife first started.

It was extraordinary how quickly the little pugilist took it all in. He nodded and nodded, with the firelight playing upon his hard, capable face.

"I have told Ashton everything," Charlie said, turning to Sir Philip, "everything except about what happened in the smoking-room only a minute before he brought Miss Vincent in."

Wag pricked up his ears. "Ah," he said, "then you, too, have had some experiences to-night?"

"We have, indeed, Mr. Ashton," Sir Philip replied, and in a few trenchant sentences he explained what had occurred.

"And the letter, Sir Philip?"

Sir Philip drew the letter from the pocket of his velvet smoking-suit, and held it out before him with trembling hands.

"Allow me," Charlie broke in. He rose from his chair, took the letter, quietly pulled out his pocket-knife, opened the blade, and slit up the envelope. He withdrew the contents—a single

sheet—and read it without a sign of perturbation.

"It is typewritten," he said. "These are the words:

"Your son has died. Your daughter has seen how your son died. Your daughter has seen how she also may die. To-night she has witnessed a rehearsal of her own death. You fled from London yesterday. In your own house none of you are safe. You have, by a coincidence, enlisted two young men as guards, yet nothing, no one can save you from those who are determined to blot out your family and race from England. Power greater than you know of surrounds you and yours. You are people in a net. Death is hovering over your house. Still, there is one way by which you can save yourself and those you love. Give up THOSE THINGS, and you may yet preserve your life and your daughter's. THE RAVEN."

Charlie handed the letter back to Sir Philip. It was typewritten in capital letters upon a sheet of white paper.

"Even now," Charlie said, "I do not know what this means, Sir Philip."

"I was just about to tell you, Penrose," Sir Philip answered, "when the light went out in the smoking-room, and this hideous letter was flung upon our table by some unknown hand. Briefly and plainly, for six months I must guard and keep in my possession something so precious that the welfare of England depends upon it."

Both Charlie and Wag Ashton stirred in their chairs. Charlie spoke first.

"Sir Philip, you have to-night offered me a very large sum to help in protecting you. I am beginning to realise now that, mingled with your own private feud with the House of Helston, the interests of this country are concerned. That is what you mean to tell us, isn't it?"

"Just that," the other answered. "I have served my country for many years, and though I have retired from any official position, I can serve it still. I will do so!" he went on in a low, passionate voice, clenching one brown hand upon his knee. "I will not be conquered. I will sacrifice my life gladly to save my country. My son died in the same cause. That may very likely be my fate. But somehow I feel that I shall win. I feel that I shall win to safety, for myself, my

dear daughter, and for this country. I have a conviction that it will be so, now that at my right hand I have two such helpers as you, gentlemen."

The old man made a courtly bow.

"You came to me by chance," he said; "you came to me out of the unknown. But already you have proved your metal; already I look upon you as my friends. And now"—his voice became lower than ever, and he glanced quickly round the room—"and now I will put you both in full possession of the facts, under the seal of utter secrecy which you have already promised me, and which is ratified without any further oath by the fact of us all being brethren in the Craft."

At that Sir Philip rose and began to pace quietly up and down the room, the thick carpet deadening his footsteps and letting no sound penetrate to the bedroom where his daughter and Jane Gregory were asleep. His face was wrinkled with thought.

At last he stopped, leant an arm upon the mantelpiece, and prepared to speak.

He had hardly opened his mouth when Wag Ashton, who was close to the door which led to the corridor, suddenly raised his head.

"I think the occurrences of this night are not yet over," he said quickly, his head bent in an attitude of intent listening.

Charlie and Sir Philip went noiselessly up to him. For a moment no sound at all was heard, and then all three men became conscious of a curious dragging noise in the passage beyond.

They waited, an alert group, tense with expectation. After an interval of thirty seconds they heard the noise again. It seemed as if something was being pulled along the corridor, and the shuffling noise was accompanied by a slight hissing or whistling sound, like the escape of a thin jet of steam.

Charlie raised his hand in warning. He turned the handle of the door without the slightest noise, and then, with a sudden movement, followed by Wag and Sir Philip within a couple of feet, he glided out into the corridor.

Five yards away, directly under the shaded radiance of an electric pendant, a man in an Eastern robe lay upon the carpet. He was gasping for breath, struggling vainly to crawl onwards. In one ivory yellow hand was a rope, attached to an oblong box behind him. The box

was the size of an ordinary suit-case. It was of dark teak, bound with brass, and obviously of considerable weight.

“Umataro!” Sir Philip cried in a loud voice. He rushed towards the struggling, crawling figure. He bent over it, and as he did so the face of the Japanese turned up towards him with a look which none of the three ever forgot. It was the faithful, pleased expression of a dying dog. Dying indeed, for a dark, scarlet stain spread out upon the man’s grey kimono, and his eyes were already glazing in the last agony.

“I save it, I save it, master,” Umataro gasped. “They kill me, but they not get it. When they go I take it from secret place and bring it—master, good night!”

The man rolled over upon his back. His hands opened and shut. He lay motionless with the full light falling upon his yellow face, which now was strangely placid, and wore an expression of quiet triumph.

Charlie and his friend leant against the wall of the passage, sick and terrified. But Sir Philip roused them.

“Quick,” he said, and his voice was sharp and

authoritative; he seemed quite unmoved by the terrible spectacle of his dead servant. "Quick, lift that box with me, and bring it into the sitting-room."

They did as they were told. The box, which was very heavy, was carried into the middle room of the suite and placed upon the table.

"Wait here and be upon your guard," Sir Philip said, and hurried from the room.

Within five minutes the two young men heard the voices of Brice, the butler, and Sir Philip speaking in low tones. There was the sound of a body being moved, the unlocking of a door, and shortly afterwards its closing.

Sir Philip came back to the sitting-room.

"That man, gentlemen," he said, with tears in his eyes, "was one of the most faithful, loving creatures that ever lived. I shall mourn him all my life. But to-night there is no time to mourn. Here"—he placed his hand upon the teak, brass-bound box upon the table—"here is the crux of the whole matter. My poor Umataro died rather than our enemies should capture this. This box," he continued, "preserved in my care for another six months, will save England from the greatest

catastrophe in the whole of her history. Its removal from my care will plunge our country into frightful disaster. I was about to explain it all to you when this final horror occurred."

"If you can, sir," Charlie said, after a long silence in the room, "explain it to me and Mr. Ashton now. As I understand already all the danger comes from that castle a mile away upon the moor which you have shown me under the moonlight an hour ago?"

"All from there, all from there," the baronet answered.

"I knew it," Charlie continued, "even though I have not yet heard the last part of the story, I have felt that everything centres in that powerful personality which is a mystery to all the world, and which is known by the name of Lord Helston. Is it not so?"

"Yes," came the reply—the word tolling out into the room like the single stroke of some great bell.

"Then to-morrow," Penrose said quietly, "I am going to discover who or what really exists in Helston Castle. Cunning shall be met by cunning, and if I lose my life it will be well lost. I have no fear at all."

Wag Ashton had not spoken for a considerable time. He did so now. "That is a good idea, Charlie," he said, as if he were speaking of some most trivial event, "and I am coming too!"

## CHAPTER V

IT was early morning at Ravenscroft.

The air was crisp and keen, the rising sun a round ball like a crimson shield. The mist was floating upwards like ghostly wreaths of smoke; the wild northern moors were absolutely silent, save now and then for the startled calling and whirring of an old black cock or grouse which had escaped the August massacre.

Ravenscroft Hall, quarter of a mile away from where Charlie Penrose was walking with Sir Philip Vincent upon the moor, showed as a huge pile of weathered stone from which terrace after terrace upon all sides descended to a deep sunken fence. The old moat, fed by a moorland spring, still ran round the ancient house. Charlie had not known anything of it the night before, but he noticed now that the motor-cars which brought the party there had rolled into the central quadrangle over a granite bridge which spanned the encircling water. That water now was turned to the colour of blood by the onrushing sun, while

the windows of the west wing shone like red diamonds. Smoke was rising from the tall Tudor chimneys, and the great house had an air of massive security and peace.

The night before the three men upon watch in the central room had spoken but little after the horror of Umataro's murder and the bringing in of the brass-bound box. Sir Philip had more to tell Charlie and Ashton, but he had been seized with an attack of nerves, so painful to witness and so obviously necessary to dispel, that Charlie had forbore to press him.

It was not cowardice—both the young men knew this—but the result of the hideous strain upon every faculty which had been continuing for a long period, and of which they themselves had seen the horror during the last thirty-six hours.

The man's eldest son had been foully murdered under the most tragic and mysterious circumstances. Two nights before his daughter had been openly kidnapped in the West End of London, and had been forced to witness what seemed very probably a reconstruction of the actual scene of her brother's murder, and what was certainly designed to be a foreshadowing of her own.

And last night, only last night, the ex-Ambassador's trusted friend and servant, Umataro, the Japanese, had been struck to death by unseen hands in the very centre of Ravenscroft. And then there was the second appearance of the vile, inexplicable Thing, the Raven.

As Charlie turned and looked at the splendid old house lying so serenely there in the morning air, he found it difficult to believe that it was indeed the very home of horror and the house of death.

Charlie had stopped at the top of a slight eminence of heather-covered granite, and now stood gazing at Ravenscroft. His eyes were dreamy, his lips were firmly set, he was lost in deep and agitated thought.

"I know exactly what you are thinking, Penrose," Sir Philip broke in upon the silence. He threw his right hand out with a gesture of almost despair. "There!" he said, "the home of my ancestors, one of the most famous houses in England, where I and my family surely might have expected to live a quiet and happy life. I have served my country to the best of my ability; I am not aware of having committed a dishonourable action in my life, though I have made my

mistakes like most men; but in that house my dear son, the heir of the Vincents, was foully murdered. You know what occurred last night in a place I still hoped was home, but which seems to be haunted by remorseless enemies or blood-stained ghosts."

"We are going to change all that, Sir Philip," Charlie replied. "I understand what you must be feeling, but you have got Ashton and me now, and we are going to see you through."

His tone was very bright and confident. The morning air was a tonic to lungs, nerves, and brain alike. The quiet efficiency and undisturbed strength of little Wag Ashton had been a lesson to the more intellectual but less ready man. Charlie felt no fear whatever, only an immense devouring curiosity, a resolute determination to probe these horrors to the end, and—perhaps this was the most compelling motive of all—the beautiful face of Muriel Vincent was imaged upon the morning sky, and the memory of her voice came to him like music upon the little breezes that alone disturbed the silence of the moor.

"Now, Sir Philip," he continued briskly, "suppose we sit here. After the dreadful events of

last night I saw you were in no condition to tell me the final story which concerns the heavy box that Umataro died in defending. By the way, what are you going to do about that poor fellow's murder?"

"Umataro," Sir Philip replied, "is already buried. Only you, your friend, and two of my trusted servants know anything of the occurrence. A coroner's inquest would have done no good. Something of the secret of the box you have spoken of would have leaked out. All my endeavours would be ruined, all my hopes for England destroyed. I have, therefore, thought it better to commit a breach of the law, and to bury my faithful old friend from the East without a word to anyone. You and Ashton will be able to support me in case of an inquiry. And now you shall hear the last chapter of the strange story of my life."

Charlie bowed gravely.

"I told you, I think," Sir Philip continued, "that my son Anthony died for his country. He was assassinated, but it was because of his devotion to England. I am now going to enter into a matter of high international politics. I shall not bore you with details which, from the nature

of the case, could have but little interest for you. You must take it from me that what I say is correct."

"Go on, Sir Philip."

"Well, in my time as Ambassador to the Court of Japan, the Mikado had only just succeeded in establishing his ancient power. The Mikado of Japan has always been the real Emperor of the country. For many years, however, before I was sent to Japan, a usurper known as the Shogun had taken all the power, and the Mikado was a practical prisoner. The Shogun was deposed from his usurped power, and when I was accredited to Tokio, the Mikado began to consolidate his country, to open the doors to Western ideas, to recreate the great country of the East with which the West will some day have to reckon."

"The Mikado of whom you are speaking died?" Charlie asked. "I don't know much about the history of Japanese affairs, but I know that. The present Mikado is a most intelligent monarch I have always heard."

"He is, but he is a dying man," Sir Philip replied gravely. "Under the auspices of the present Mikado, Great Britain has made a treaty

with Japan which not only will preserve the balance of power in the Far East, but will be of the very greatest help to us in case of war. But, as I said before, the Mikado is a sick man."

"That means?"

"It means this, Mr. Penrose—I will not confuse your mind with historical details—but at any rate I know from private information that the Mikado is dying, and that his death will take place within six months. The Prince that will succeed him is absolutely anti-British. This young man's policy—his declared policy—is to bring Britannia to her knees."

"Still I do not see," Charlie said.

"You will in a moment. No Mikado of Japan can legally become ruler of his country unless he pays a special visit to a certain monastery, some thirty miles away from the capital. In this monastery, which is the sort of Westminster Abbey of the Japanese, three objects have been carefully preserved for many centuries. They are a sword, a crystal globe, and a curious mirror. In Japan there is no coronation as we understand it in our country. The real coronation, the real sacrament, is the initiation of the emperor to the

rites and observations of which these objects are the symbols."

Charlie rose from the granite rock upon which he had been sitting.

"Ah, Sir Philip," he said quietly, "now I understand what are the contents of the brass-bound box."

The elder man nodded. "It is just that," he said. "My son, through a series of adventures which would hardly be believed if they were written, removed the sword, the mirror, and the crystal from the monastery. While I have these in my possession no Mikado can be crowned."

"But what do you wish to prevent, Sir Philip?"

"I wish to prevent the succession to the throne of a Prince of the Samurai who will certainly succeed by popular acclamation, and who will embroil the whole of Europe."

"And how exactly do you mean to bring about this thing?"

"It is quite simple," Sir Philip answered. "When the Mikado dies Prince Hirosaki cannot possibly become Mikado without the sacred symbols. If he is not crowned within two or three months the unanimous wish of the people will elect another and far more promising candi-

date to the throne. There are secret European agents steadily at work in Japan. They will make it known that the secret symbols will at once be returned if Prince Hirosaki is passed over and his cousin, Prince Satsumi, who is especially favourable towards England, is chosen.

"Now you have the whole thing in a nutshell," the Ambassador concluded. "My son has already been sacrificed. I am prepared, if necessary, to die myself in this cause, and how near death I am is no secret to you."

"Sir Philip," Charlie said, and the tone of his voice was both brisk and earnest, "you and yours are going to be saved. The whole horrible conspiracy directed against you is going to be discovered and squashed. You have enlisted me and my friend. Rely upon us."

"I do, my dear boy," the elder man answered, "indeed I do. But few men in my dreadful position could keep their nerve unspoilt. I am not a cowardly man," he concluded, unconsciously bracing himself up and looking round the landscape with a clear eye, "but what has happened to me of late is enough to fill me with a dreadful fear of the future."

"The great thing," Charlie said, taking a brier

pipe from his pocket and quietly filling it, "is to be practical. You have done me the honour to put the conduct of your affairs in my hands. We must get to action at once."

"Ah, I was waiting to hear you say that," Sir Philip answered. "I felt when you asked me to come for a walk upon the moor that you had some definite plan. What is it?"

"I understand, Sir Philip, that the brother of the late Lady Vincent, General Yeoland, is in command of the garrison at York?"

"Certainly he is," Sir Philip answered, "and my brother-in-law is one of the finest chaps alive—not particularly intellectual, but a first-class soldier, whose record in South Africa you probably know of. He married one of the daughters of the old Earl of Truro, and Maria is a delightful woman. She is younger than her husband, and Muriel and she get on together very well."

"I have heard so, Sir Philip—Ashton told me so."

"Ashton?" the baronet said, with a puzzled face.

Charlie smiled. "Ashton is engaged to Miss Vincent's maid, Jane Gregory."

"Of course, I remember."

"I have thought everything out, Sir Philip, and I can see what must be done at once—without a moment's delay. Miss Vincent must flee from Ravenscroft. She must go to York and stay with her aunt for a time. Within an hour she must leave the house as unobtrusively as possible. We don't know, of course, what spies there are upon our doings here. But without any delay your daughter must motor to York. Once in the house of the General commanding the Division she will surely be secure from the mysterious and horrible visitations in Ravenscroft. I propose that one of the motors should be got ready at once, and that Ashton and I should accompany Miss Vincent to York. You will write a letter which I shall deliver to General Yeoland. As he knows nothing of the truth, it will only be necessary for you to ask him to have Miss Vincent most carefully guarded. And if Lord Helston, the Thing called the Raven, or any of the infernal and diabolical influences which surround you now, for reasons of family hate and the enmity of Japan, can get anywhere near a girl surrounded by half a brigade of English soldiers —well, I am a fool, Sir Philip."

The elder man brought one hand to another

with a resounding clap. The blue eyes, under white brows, grew keen and brave again. "You've hit it!" he said, "you've hit it! Muriel, at any rate, will be out of the way."

"Yes, she will be out of the way of the campaign which we are all about to wage against the most subtle and deadly enemies of which in my wildest moments I have ever dreamed. But more than that, Sir Philip, you have with you that brass-bound box through which last night poor Umataro lost his life; for gaining which your son and my late school friend died. Do you think for a single moment that it is safe in Ravenscroft?"

The other shook his head. "If I did not know," he replied, "that Mr. Ashton was sitting by it now with two loaded pistols upon the table, even in this beautiful light of dawn, and in the most secluded room of Ravenscroft, I should not think it safe."

"It was safe in London, was it not?"

"Yes, in London they could not touch it. The box was deposited in the vaults of Coutt's bank, and even the ingenuity of *my* enemies could not reach it there. But certain developments have occurred—as I am constantly advised from Ja-

pan—which seem to make it necessary for me to have the mysterious objects of the coronation close to my hand. Foolishly, rashly, I admit now, I have brought them with me to this remote part of England. And," Sir Philip continued, with a catch in his breath, "by doing so I have sacrificed the best servant and the oldest friend I have ever had."

"I have thought this matter out also," Charlie replied quickly. "The box must go with Miss Vincent to York. But it must be taken into the motor secretly, wrapped up in a pile of rugs. Within an hour of our leaving for York another car must start, and a box made to look like the real one must be somewhat ostentatiously put into it and driven off towards London."

"I do not exactly see your meaning, Penrose," Sir Philip answered.

"No? Yet it is quite simple. The danger comes from Helston Castle. It is idle to suppose that the agents of Lord Helston, or whoever may be the controlling power in these horrible affairs, are not watching Ravenscroft with the keenest attention. The fact of Miss Vincent driving away will not matter to these people for a short time. Personal vengeance may be grati-

fied later—that is how I deduce their thought. They are after the Japanese regalia, and when some spy upon the moor sees, through his field-glasses, what he imagines to be the real box put into a car and driven away, there will be a swift and organised pursuit."

"You have it, you have it! Your plan is excellent!"

"Then we must put it into execution at once, Sir Philip. Remember that our adversaries are people of such cunning and resource, so absolutely unscrupulous that they will stick at nothing whatever. Give instructions to the chauffeur of the second car. Let the false box be stolen. That will give us time to work, time to penetrate the mystery, to confound our enemies, and to sweep them out of the path for ever."

"You inspire me with new hopes, Mr. Penrose. I bless the fortunate chance which brought you and Mr. Ashton to my help. But can it ever be? Can we fight against the unknown and be triumphant?"

Charlie laughed. His blithe, youthful voice echoed upon the sunlit, purple moor with such gaiety and confidence that the other took new courage from it.

“Didn’t we tell you, Sir Philip,” Charlie said, “that I and Wag are going this very night to make a first attempt upon the stronghold of the enemy?” As he spoke he turned, and Sir Philip turned with him. A mile away, stark and black against the painted morning sky, stood the grim, castellated keep of Helston Castle.

Even as they looked, a little ball ran up the flag-staff of the central tower, and broke at the top. The great red flag, with the Helston crest in the centre, shook out to the breeze. It showed that the mysterious holder of the title was in residence, but the two men who watched it knew that it was both a menace and a challenge in one.

Charlie took off his cap. “So shall it be,” he called in a loud voice. “I take your challenge, Lord Helston, whoever or whatever you may be.”

“And I will have the Vincent flag up, by Jove!” the old gentleman said, “directly we get back to Ravenscroft. The peerage of Helston was created in the time of George II., but the first Vincent was made a baronet in the days of James I., and I am the fourteenth of the line. We will see if honest love for England can’t com-

bat against kidnapping, murder, and the terror that walks by night."

As they walked home Charlie and Sir Philip never spoke a word. But their faces were bright and cheerful. They strode over the heather, and came down to the terraces of the noble house with a swing of resolution.

As they crossed the stone bridge over the moat and entered the quadrangle, the mansion presented an appearance of perfect tranquillity. Upon one side were the open doors of the garage. The three chauffeurs were busily cleaning their cars. Upon the other and uninhabited side, where the red creepers had grown almost over the mullioned windows and the pigeons cooed softly upon the mellow roofs, the morning sun was pouring down.

"When all this trouble is over, Penrose," Sir Philip said briskly, "I must go through the rooms on that side of the quad and rescue the picture gallery from what, I am afraid, is a rather mildewed condition."

They entered at the little door which led to the modernised west wing, mounted the stairs, and went into the dining-room.

A bright wood fire burnt upon the hearth. The

panelled walls of oak had caught the sunlight, and all the old portraits were tinged and touched to life. The butler and a footman were moving round a long table. In a moment or two Muriel Vincent entered. Behind her came Wag Ashton and another footman—they were carrying a heavy box of dark wood.

The butler and the footmen were dismissed. "You will breakfast with us, please, Mr. Ashton," Sir Philip said, and as they sat down to the meal the baronet, in a few terse sentences, explained the plan which Charlie had devised upon the moor.

Breakfast did not take more than half an hour. Muriel retired to make preparations with her maid. Wag was dispatched to the courtyard to give instructions to the chauffeurs. Charlie and Sir Philip were left alone.

At one side of the room there was an oak table. On it stood the box upon which so much depended.

Suddenly Sir Philip looked at Charlie. "My friend, he said, "I am depending absolutely upon your fidelity. I feel that you ought to have the privilege of looking upon the contents of that box, for it is greatly upon you that the preserva-

tion of what it contains depends. Few eyes have ever seen these strange and mysterious emblems. At the moment there is no time for you to see them. Only three Europeans have ever seen them to my knowledge—my son, myself, and my daughter. You shall be the fourth. I am going to entrust one of the two keys to you. You must give it back to me directly you return from York. My daughter has the only other key; she wears it round her neck. You are traveling in the large car. Mr. Ashton, well armed, will be in front with the chauffeur. Before you get to York, and during your rush through the moors, you may pull down the blinds and take a glimpse at those royal emblems which you are sworn to protect."

Half an hour afterwards the great Mercedes car stood waiting in the centre of the quadrangle.

The chief chauffeur, a grey-haired, trusted servant, was in the driving seat, his hand upon the wheel. By his side was little Wag Ashton, muffled in a heavy leather coat, a large cap pressed down over his eyes, his hands in the two pockets of his coat, hands nervously fingering two hard, metallic handles.

From the door in the corner, a footman hurried with a dressing-bag and a large bundle of rugs.

He had but hardly put them in the closed car, and was standing waiting by the door, when a young gentleman and a young lady crossed the court and jumped into the car. Almost simultaneously it began to move, as the gates of Ravenscroft were thrown open. The car rolled over the granite bridge which spanned the moat, and within it sat a young man and a maid who were looking steadfastly into each other's eyes.

## CHAPTER VI

THE hour was a supreme one for Charlie Penrose. Every circumstance combined to make it so. The swift change in his life, the terrible responsibilities he had undertaken, the exhilaration of danger—all sent the blood racing through his veins on this bright, cold morning of winter, as the great car rolled swiftly down the moor road on its two hours' journey to York. And above all, crowning all, he was alone with Muriel Vincent, whom he loved. He was alone with her, she was looking into his eyes, she was trusted to him so that he might be her guardian and protector.

For he knew now that he was hopelessly, inevitably, in love. He was certain as he had ever been of anything in his life that this girl was the one girl in the world for him.

He had never before been even faintly in love. His guardian's failure, which had thrown him upon the world at eighteen without a penny, had made it necessary for him to earn his living in the

hardest of schools. The mere question of bread to eat and a shelter for his head had occupied all his time. And now, despite the peril in which he stood—and he had no illusions upon that point at all—the world seemed an entirely different place from that of less than three days ago. He had never felt so strong, happy, so proud or glad, as at this moment when the ride to York began.

Muriel was looking into his eyes! A faint fragrance came from the dark masses of her hair, the proudly arched lips were parted, the beautiful face glowed with quiet purpose.

“And you,” Charlie thought to himself, “you are the girl who, the night before last, was kidnapped in a London street, and forced to witness pictured horrors such as you could have never dreamed before. And you are the girl to whom, only last night, the real Horror which the picture foreshadowed actually appeared in the stronghold of your father’s house. The hideous mystery of all that has not changed or broken you!”

Some such thoughts as these flashed through Charlie’s mind in a single second. He felt a flood of reverence, an almost overpowering rush of admiration, and while his face showed instinc-

tively the emotion that he experienced, Muriel spoke.

"Mr. Penrose," she said, "I feel almost happy."

The words were strange. For a moment Charlie hardly understood them.

"Happy!" he said, "how can that be, Miss Vincent?"

"Everything is relative," she answered calmly. "I mean that I am happier than I have been for many months. And the reason for it is that you and your friend have come so strangely into the life of myself and my father. I feel assured now that you two will save us—and more than us"—with one slim gloved hand she pointed to the long box which was at their feet.

"You care for that?" Charlie said.

"I care for it more than any question of personal safety. I know my father's hopes for England. I am an English girl, and I put my country before everything. Father has this great weight upon his shoulders. He cannot co-operate with the Foreign Office. He is working independently and unofficially for his country. He is spending enormous sums to secure his end. I am with him heart and soul."

“Miss Vincent,” Charlie replied, in a voice as earnest and determined as her own, “Miss Vincent, so am I.”

The girl had been looking out of the window of the car as she spoke, looking at the wild, receding landscape with dreamy eyes. Now she turned to Charlie with a quick, impulsive movement. The lovely face, that had hitherto been sad and grave, lit up with warmth and friendship.

“Ah,” she cried, “I am glad to hear your say so. Not that I doubted it, Mr. Penrose—I didn’t doubt it for a single moment; but my dear father’s nerves are shattered. He is a brave man—his record, which I will not enter into now, shows it clearly. His great scheme, and all he has endured to further it, prove that fact. But though his resolve is as strong as it ever was, he is losing the capability to carry it out.”

“I have come as his lieutenant. I and my friend are here to protect you and him. Be sure that we shall do it.”

“Oh, I am sure,” the girl answered eagerly. “I am deeply sure. But there is one thing I want to ask you.”

“And that is?”

"Why are you enthusiastic and devoted to a cause of which you knew nothing three days ago? This morning before we left my father told me that he had offered you—forgive me if I mention it—very many thousand pounds if all went well; and yet father said you waived away the suggestion of terms, and would not hear of any definite agreement. Why?"

"Can't I love England too, Miss Vincent?"

"Yes, but you have taken as gospel every word that my father, who is a perfect stranger, has said. If a war had suddenly sprung up, like the Boer War, for instance, I have no doubt you would have gone out as a volunteer to fight for your country. But this is quite different. This is a most secret matter; already you have realised that your life, and that of your friend, is in great danger."

"Then do you doubt my good faith, Miss Vincent?" Charlie asked in a voice that trembled.

"No! a thousand times no! But I have a mind to think and some knowledge of the way things go in life—that is why I ask you this question."

How sweet she was, how unutterably sweet! Her voice was like the celeste stop upon an organ. Her eyes were charged with a challenge

rather than a curiosity, and upon her curved red lips an eager pathos lay.

"Well, you see, Miss Vincent," he replied, making an enormous effort to be prosaic and commonplace, exercising a self-control that made the voice come harshly and unnaturally from his throat, "well, you see, it was just good luck that I met that horrible Japanese the night before last. I had been dismissed from my wretched post as a cinema operator. The money he offered seemed wealth. Of course, when I realised what was going on, I did my best to come to your help. I was prevented. By a further stroke of luck I met you later on the same night, and was taken into your father's house. Can't you see what an inducement all this is to a penniless young man? I have no prospects whatever. I am about as careless of my own skin as most fellows of my age and position. Whatever financial benefit I reap from the business on which your father has so kindly engaged me, it will be everything to me."

He said it bravely; but his own ears heard how false and hollow was the voice.

As Muriel answered him her face became a mask of high contempt. "I see, Mr. Penrose!"

she said, "one job is as good as another. You don't much care what happens to you, and of course you stand to win largely if all goes well."

Even now he preserved his self-control. "Exactly," he replied, "a free lance of fortune, Miss Vincent; I hope a faithful one."

And then, in an instant, the comedy was over. She had tried him, and she knew.

She held out both her hands. Her face was quivering with sympathy. Her eyes radiated a soft light.

"And now," she said in a quiet voice, "take my hands and tell me the truth."

He caught the little hands in his own with a swift and eager pressure. The assumed cynicism flashed away—his face was very near indeed to hers.

"But how can I tell you?" he said hoarsely—once his breath was caught up into something very like a sob. "How can I tell you, even now? I am nobody. I am nothing."

"I have asked you to tell me," the girl answered, and her eyes fell before his passionate gaze, and a blush as faint as the inside of a rare sea shell came out upon her cheeks. It was as

though red wine had been poured into a goblet of pure crystal water. It was a confession.

Charlie's whole heart leapt up in one wild ecstasy. "Muriel," he said with hurried, passionate utterance, "I didn't dare, oh, I didn't dare!"

The last moment of hesitation, the last scruple held him. With her hands gripped in his he began to tremble exceedingly. How was he worthy of so peerless and lovely a maiden? Was it not a breach of all trust, of all honour, to avow a love born of horrors, only a few hours old, and yet a love which he well knew would endure within him—for her only—for ever, and a day beyond?

A man is a man, and a girl is a girl, and the twain must meet at last. Artificial considerations of wealth or position melt away, sometimes, in the glowing heat of pure first love. The strong male impulse asserts itself. The strong feminine surrender makes its sweet appeal.

His arms were round her now. Their lips met. Man and maid tasted that moment of supremest ecstasy when heart and soul become one—enter into a oneness which no sword of Fate can sever.

They were above the thunders and lightnings of Fate. Whatever was to happen, they were

each other's. And so, flying from hideous peril, they brought into the world a new thing, a new, all-powerful influence—mutual love arrayed against “the arrow that flieth by noonday, and the terror that walketh by night.”

And in the heart of each began that anthem which tells clear souls that Love will be triumphant.

At last he released her. The moment of perfect ecstasy was over. The world came rushing back into his consciousness; he was aware once more of the old disabilities, most poignantly aware of the peril in which they stood.

“Do you mean it, Muriel?” he asked hurriedly. “Socially, no doubt, I am your equal. As I told Sir Philip, my father was Colonel Penrose of the Guards, and my mother a daughter of old Richard Mullion—I come of good Cornish families on both sides. But I am penniless and unknown.”

She lifted one little hand, and smiled at him with ineffable sweetness. “Charlie,” she said, “you are mine now, and this is the last time I shall ever allow you to say such words as these. You have come out of the unknown to be my love, and to be the champion of the great secret

cause for which my father has endured everything. That is enough."

She paused for a moment, and then her hand stole out and rested on his shoulder. "Charlie," she said, "you will conquer all difficulties—you and your clever little brown-faced friend—won't you?"

He took her hand from his shoulder, bent over it, and kissed it in the most courtly fashion. "Beloved," he replied, "I have not a single doubt in my mind. I know now that whatever happens I shall be adequate. Something tells me with certainty that I shall help your father to accomplish all he wishes for England."

She sat up straightly in her seat. Her lovely face was once more proud and disdainful of all common things. "We shall do it!" she cried, "you, father, and myself! Charlie, think of it! We are resting our feet upon the peace of Europe—no, upon the peace of the whole world."

For a moment he did not take her, and then he saw that her little bronzed shoes were using the rug, which covered the mysterious box, as a footstool. Unconsciously his left foot was also resting on it.

"Yes," she continued, "down below there is

the regalia of Japan, without which Japan, that marvellous country of possibility and tradition, is like a great ship rudderless at sea."

"And it is that," the young man replied with quick enthusiasm, "that we must guard at all costs until the sick Mikado passes to his ancestors. Your father, of course, told me everything."

"Have you seen what is in the box?"

He shook his head.

"Soon you must see the contents. Have you ever been to the Tower of London and looked at the crown jewels?"

"Yes, I have. I stood there once for nearly half an hour gazing at the Koh-i-noor and all the emeralds, rubies, and sapphires that stud the crown. I remember thinking—for I was in very low water at the time—how the very smallest of those innumerable jewels would enable me to make a real start in life."

"Poor boy," she answered tenderly, "but if you could look through that rug and the lid of the box, you would see below you three objects so beautiful, of such incalculable cost, that you would realise that there is nothing else like them in the world. The sword, the mirror, and the

crystal globe are relics handed down to the rulers of Japan from immemorial times. The sword is a short, curved scimitar of steel, so finely tempered that it is believed to have been wrought by no human hands. They say that by its own weight it will fall through a thick quilted cushion. The handle is made of four great emeralds, the guard of gold, inlaid with black pearls; an enormous pear-shaped diamond hangs at the end of a twisted tassel of gold wire.

"The mirror is not of glass, but of some ancient polished stone, far clearer than any mirror we can make to-day. The secret has been lost, but the mirror is surrounded by coiling dragons of gold with sapphires for eyes. Probably, Charlie"—he thrilled as she called him that—"probably the workmanship and intrinsic value of the mirror alone is worth more than all the crown jewels of England."

"And then," she continued, "there is the crystal globe. Charlie, it is like a ball of light. If it were put in a darkened room that room would be no longer dark. It is supported upon a base of sculptured metal leaves. The leaves are of soft, red gold and some dead black metal, the very name of which is lost. They say that when the

new Mikado of Japan looks into the shining, opalescent depths of the crystal he sees all his fate spread out before him, as a traveller sees his voyage upon a map."

She took her feet away from the covering rug with a quick movement. "You see," she concluded, "we have with us not only the peace of the world, but the most precious treasure of the world too."

"In this car!" Charlie said.

She nodded.

"But you are wrong, sweetheart," he said, "these wonders and marvels of which you have told me, and which we are guarding at this moment, are not so splendid nor supreme as two other things."

She looked at him inquiringly.

He took her gently in his arms. "My dear," he said simply, "there are two jewels more precious and more wonderful than all. Muriel is here, and with us is the great jewel of love."

He said it beautifully, and every fibre in the girl's being responded to the low, passionate notes of his voice. She laughed, a low, languorous laugh of joy. "We are all safe, Charlie?" she said.

Then, with a quick, characteristic movement, she twisted away from him and became almost business-like.

"Charlie, what do you suppose that Thing I saw in my room last night really was? We have a legend, you know, that the house is haunted by a great raven."

"What it was, sweetheart, I do not know," the young man answered, "but I am certain it was no supernatural appearance. My own theory, and I believe I am absolutely right, is that the enemies of your father are trading on the superstition in order to terrorise him—through you."

His face assumed a grim anxiety. "The devils!" he said, "trying to accomplish their objects through the torture of a girl! Of course, Muriel, last night was all part of the same scheme that brought me into your life, when you were forced to watch those hideous cinema pictures."

She nodded wisely. "You are perfectly right, Charlie, and there is one directing mind. All the fantastic and hideous occurrences to which we have been subject are invented and arranged by an intellect very far above the average. If it were not so, these things could not have happened. Devilish malignity, untiring resource, a

perverted hatred—these are what actuate our enemy.”

“I notice you say enemy.”

“Of course, Charlie, for you must have come to the same conclusion that father and I have come to——?”

“Lord Helston?”

“Whoever and whatever Lord Helston is,” she answered gravely. “I sometimes think that there is no real Lord Helston, but that some fiend, concealed from mortal eyes, has assumed his state and name. Of one thing I am sure: when you penetrate this awful mystery—as you will, dear Charlie—you will not only save us, but you will find something so abnormal and beyond the ordinary experience of life that you may well go armed in mind and body upon your dangerous quest.”

For at least a minute there was silence. The brightness of the morning had faded a little. Sunlight no longer fell in golden showers over the moorlands. The beautiful and luxurious car rolled onwards at a level pace. Before them they saw the back of the chauffeur and the back of little Wag Ashton in his heavy coat.

Suddenly, as they lay back in their padded

seat, hand in hand, they saw Ashton start in his place.

The glass was just a little frosted, but they could see quite clearly that, with a word to the chauffeur, he had risen and was peering round the side of the car.

Ashton was almost immediately back in his seat and fumbling in a little box between the steering wheel and the speedometer. He whipped out a pair of black motor goggles, had them over his eyes in a moment, and once more peered out behind.

Charlie was sitting exactly behind Ashton in the big landauette. He saw his friend leaning backwards, close to him, as the car rushed onwards, now with greatly accelerated speed.

Charlie caught the leather band of the window and shut it down into its place. He put out his head and shoulders, and his face was now within three inches of Ashton's. "What is it, Wag?" he asked hurriedly.

"Look behind," was the reply.

Charlie turned.

There was a white riband of road stretching away for more than a mile. But within seven hundred yards, in the centre of the road, coming

towards them at a furious pace, Charlie saw an immense car of dead, lifeless black.

Even then, for a moment, he did not realise. "What's the trouble, Wag?" he shouted, as the wind of their passage shrieked and whistled past.

"That car, the car that went through York last night, the car that got to Helston Castle before our arrival at Ravenscroft," Wag gasped.

"Then?" Charlie shouted.

"They're after us, Charlie. They have been watching us all the time since we left Ravenscroft. Our plan of the other car and the dummy box has failed!"

Charlie felt agitated hands plucking at his sleeve. For a moment he turned back into the closed car.

"What is it, what is it, Charlie?" Muriel cried.

He knew it was useless to deceive her. "A great car, much bigger than our own," he said, "and with far greater power, is chasing us. The people from Helston are trying to cut us off or run us down."

For a moment her face turned a dead white. Her eyes fell to the box upon the floor of the car. She clasped her hands as if in an agony

of supplication. Then, so quickly that Charlie almost doubted the evidence of his eyes, Muriel sank back and laughed.

"Let them come," she cried, "how can they hurt me or take away what we are guarding when you are here!"

Charlie once more thrust his shoulders out of the window.

By now the enormous black car was appreciably nearer. His own chauffeur was bending forward over the wheel, rigid and intent. They were running at least forty miles an hour, and every instant, as the driver manipulated the little levers which controlled the spark, the mixture of air and petrol in the chambers below, the speed was rising up.

But the car behind was closing upon them like some great black hawk.

Charlie heard the echo of an excited and exultant laugh, mingled with the furious uproar of their passage. It came from Wag Ashton.

Then Charlie saw an extraordinary thing. The little fellow put his foot upon the door of the driving seat, gripped the luggage rail on the fixed top of the landauette, and leapt up on the

roof. He had vanished from Charlie's sight, but as the pursuing car—now not more than a hundred yards away—shot at them like a torpedo, Charlie heard above his head four rapid explosions.

He saw the black car swerve violently, recover itself, press onwards for a second, heel over to one side, totter, and fall at a steep angle against a low, creeper-covered wall of stone which bounded the moorland road upon the right. He saw the chauffeur cutting off his engines and pressing down his brakes in a fury of movement, and then, within a second or two, his own car turned a corner, and the wreck behind flashed away.

The next thing that Muriel and Charlie saw was a pair of thin, active legs, in cord breeches, descend from above their heads, and shoot into the window. The legs were followed by the rest of Mr. Wag Ashton, who, stumbling over the box upon the floor, sank into one of the front seats with a bland smile upon his face.

He produced a Colt automatic pistol from his pocket, weighed it in the palm of his hand, and looked at it lovingly.

"Jolly good thing I can shoot with one of these," he said with a grin, "don't you think so? I jumped on the roof and got their two front tyres as easy as possible. Now I expect we shall have an uninterrupted drive into York!"

## CHAPTER VII

IT was quite dark. The moon had not yet risen. A little wind sighed and moaned round the dark house of Ravenscroft.

Sir Philip Vincent sat alone in one of the rooms of the west wing—not that in which the mysterious letter had been found upon the table. The room was lighted by lamps—there was to be no sudden cutting off of the electric light to-night! A fire glowed redly upon the hearth and shone upon a distinguished-looking, elderly gentleman, sitting in an armchair by the side of a low tea-table. The walls were covered with books save where, here and there, a tarnished family portrait hung between the shelves. No picture could have been more quiet, domestic, and serene than the one presented by this comfortable room, with its single inmate, at half-past five upon a winter's afternoon.

But peace was not there. Instead of peace, there was wild surmise and conjecture—a man's mind shaken to its foundation, not knowing of

what horror or disaster the next moment might bring forth.

Sir Philip sipped his tea. His face was pinched and wan. He put down his cup upon the great silver tray, poured out some more tea, and lit a cigarette. Then, leaning forward, he gazed steadily into the glowing heart of the fire. He was reviewing the events of the last few days, trying to find a loophole for hope, endeavouring to see his position clearly and accurately, as a man surveys the pieces upon a board of chess.

He nodded to himself. He had thought out one thing. His own life was not at present in danger. If he were murdered his enemies could never hope to gain possession of the regalia of Japan until it was too late for their purpose. But his son had been mysteriously slain; his daughter threatened, not once, but twice; his faithful servant, Umataro, had been struck down to death, without a sign or clue as to the murderers.

“I see,” he said quietly, “they are going to terrorise me into giving up the box. That is their plan. They are meaning now to show me that my daughter’s life is at their mercy if I do not come to terms. The letter last night proves that

conclusively. They have tried to put me in the position of sacrificing Muriel—as Anthony was sacrificed—or preserving her by means of treachery to the ideal for which I have fought so long.” He threw the stump of his cigarette into the fire. A little smile came upon his face.

“Well,” he muttered, “they have reckoned without the assistance which Fate, or a higher power than Fate, has brought me. Those two boys, Penrose and Ashton, will save us all if it can be done. Already they have taken Muriel out of harm’s way. My letter to Tom Yeoland and what Penrose will tell him ensures the dear girl’s safety. If they can get at her in the house of the General commanding the garrison, who has been especially warned against any such attempt——” Sir Philip rose with confidence in his eyes.

He crossed the room, pulled aside the curtain, and gazed out of the big mullioned window. It commanded the moor road which led to York, but he could not see the lights of an approaching car, and he suddenly feared that something had gone wrong. Penrose and Ashton ought to have been back long ago.

Brice, the butler, came into the room. There

was the yellow envelope of a telegram upon a tray which he carried.

Sir Philip snatched it and tore it open. This was what he read:

“Remaining to-night in York. Miss Vincent safe with General Yeoland. Fear we must return to London upon pressing private business. Obliged if you will send car to-morrow with luggage and what is arranged as remuneration for services rendered.

“ASHTON AND PENROSE.”

Sir Philip read the telegram and looked up at the butler. “Who brought this?” he said.

“It came in the car, Sir Philip.”

“The car? What do you mean?”

“The same which took Miss Muriel and the two young gentlemen this morning,” Brice answered. “The chauffeur stopped in the village on his way up, and he gave a lift to the boy.”

“Send Rainer to me,” Sir Philip answered.

In three minutes the chauffeur of the big car was standing in the little library, his peaked cap in his hand.

"What has happened to-day, Rainer?" Sir Philip asked.

The man's face was pale. He was obviously ill at ease, his hands fidgeted with his cap.

"Well, Sir Philip, there was a sort of accident like on our way to York this morning."

"Miss Muriel?"

"Oh, Miss Muriel's all right, Sir Philip. We didn't come to any harm."

"Tell me about it as briefly and clearly as you can."

Rainer gave a graphic account of the pursuit upon the moor. He told in detail how the huge black car had rushed after them, with the obvious intention of wrecking the landaulette. With intense admiration in his voice, he told his master of Wag Ashton's leap upon the roof, and the lucky shot which had enabled them to get away.

"Of course I knew, Sir Philip," the man continued, "that we were all upon a dangerous affair. I have known it, and the other two chauffeurs have known it, ever since we left Park Lane and you gave us a sort of hint like."

"You are frightened, Rainer?" the baronet rapped out sharply, the telegram in his hand trembling as he said it.

“Thank you, Sir Philip, not in the least. Both I and my men are ready to stay and carry out all our instructions.”

“Thank you for that, Rainer. You have been in my service for a considerable time now. I wish others were as faithful. And now, tell me what happened in York.”

“Nothing particular, Sir Philip. We drove to the barracks, and Miss Muriel and the two young gentlemen went in with the luggage. I waited about an hour in the barracks square, and then Mr. Penrose came out and told me to go to the Saracen’s Head Hotel and wait there for him. Just before four Mr. Penrose and Mr. Ashton turned up. They directed me to come back at once, saying that they had to go to London. They said they would communicate with you, Sir Philip.”

“Quite so,” Sir Philip answered, and his voice was cold and bitterly contemptuous. “The telegram that the boy brought on in the car has just informed me of this. You may go now, Rainer, and thank you for what you have said.”

“Good evening, Sir Philip.”

“Good evening, Rainer.”

The chauffeur closed the door quietly, and the

hasp had hardly clicked into its frame when Sir Philip's face was convulsed with fury.

"The dogs! the dogs!" he cried. "Cowards who forced themselves upon my notice, who seemed to promise just the support I needed, and who have now turned tail and fled away! They are in possession of my secret. They have a marketable commodity which will bring them thousands of pounds. Fool that I have been. I have trusted in strangers, and this is final, utter ruin! Muriel is safe—that is something, but these young scoundrels are now in a position to disclose my whole scheme to the highest bidder. My sacrifices for England have been all in vain."

In his agitated striding up and down the room, Sir Philip came against the low tea-table. The big silver tray slid off, and the delicate china crashed and broke upon the carpet.

He laughed bitterly. "My fortunes!" he said, looking down upon the ruin. And then as he heard the echo of his own voice die away his whole body stiffened and he stood rigid by the fire.

Might it not be—the thought was so hideous as it flashed into his brain that mind and body could hardly endure it—might it not be that these two men, Ashton and Penrose, were, after all,

only disguised emissaries of the dark intelligence known as Lord Helston? Was not this a hideous refinement of subtle torture, a cruelty more calculated and intense than the blood-stained records of the Inquisition itself could show?

A strange thing happened.

There was a knock at the door. Sir Philip started and looked towards it with frightened eyes. Who could be knocking?

Well-trained servants did not knock at a door before entering. He summoned up a voice and called "Come in."

Brice entered. As he did so Sir Philip gave a sigh of relief to see the portly and accustomed form of his servant. The relief turned into a sudden gust of irritation.

"What did you knock for, confound you?" he cried.

"Beg your pardon, Sir Philip, an especial occasion, Sir Philip. There are people insisting upon seeing you."

"Tell them to go to the devil," the baronet barked out. "I can't see anybody at present."

Then he noticed there was a smile upon the butler's face.

"I think you will see them, Sir Philip, and I have ventured to bring them right up at once."

Brice held the door open a little wider, and two low-class and villainous-looking men lurched into the library. They were dirty, unkempt, and ragged—at first sight the lowest class of tramps, but as Brice, without any further orders, slipped away and closed the door, Sir Philip Vincent cut short the flow of angry words that had risen to his lips. Amazement and anger gave way to recognition.

"Good heavens!" he cried. "Penrose! Ashton!"

The smaller of the scarecrow figures raised its hand warningly.

"Speak quietly, Sir Philip. What is the name of the caretaker's son?"

"Dent—but why?"

"Ring again for Brice, please, Sir Philip."

Sir Philip pressed the bell-push, and the butler came.

"Tell young Dent that Sir Philip wishes to see him, please, Mr. Brice," Charlie Penrose said quickly. "Tell him that you think Sir Philip wants to consult him about some strange things

that have occurred lately at Ravenscroft. You understand?"

Brice nodded and left the room.

The dirty-looking ruffian who had the voice of Charlie Penrose spoke eagerly. "I can't explain now, Sir Philip," he said. "Ah, here he comes."

There was a knock upon the door; it opened, and a young fellow of twenty-three or so, with shifty eyes, wearing breeches and gaiters, came in.

Then Sir Philip received a sudden shock.

Wag Ashton leapt at the young man with the swiftness and silence of some great cat. In less time than it takes to tell Dent was upon the floor, helpless, and Ashton was pressing something into the wretched creature's mouth. In a moment more the gag was kept in place by a white handkerchief, and Charlie Penrose was neatly tying up the groom's wrists and ankles.

Sir Philip sat down again in his armchair by the fire. These things were too much for him, but a sense of relief and joy, so overpowering that it choked all speech and forbade all movement, possessed every fibre of his being.

At length the two sorry figures whom Brice had ushered in stood before him. Dent lay

bound, gagged, and motionless upon the carpet.

"We took the train from York to Heamoor," Charlie said quickly. "You have heard all about the pursuit this morning?"

"Rainer told me everything."

"Quite so. Well, you know at any rate that Miss Muriel and the box are safe. Miss Muriel is with her uncle. I gave him your letter, Sir Philip, and told him enough of all this to make him strongly upon his guard. The box was taken to the vaults of the County Bank under escort of half a dozen soldiers. The York police have been communicated with, and the bank will be guarded day and night. It is close to the barracks, and General Yeoland has also organised a military watch, in addition to the police supervision. The regalia of Japan are safe for the time."

"You said you took the train to Heamoor station—five miles away? Then what did that mean, Penrose, and why did you telegraph to me as you did—though I am beginning to see a little light now."

"Because," Charlie answered in a low voice, "they have spies everywhere. The great thing was to throw them off the scent. I knew that the

telegram I sent would be seen before it reached you. There was a train to London shortly after we had fixed up Miss Muriel and sent the box to the bank. We took tickets and got into it, but it had hardly left the station of York and was gathering speed, when Wag and I dropped out into the goods' yard. We just managed to do it without anything more than a few bruises. Then we went into a low part of the town, bought ragged clothes, and disguised ourselves as you see us. We had already arranged that the telegram should be sent to the post office at York by a messenger. In our tramps' clothes we got upon the local train to Heamoor, quite unobserved—of that I am certain—and we have tramped the last few miles to Ravenscroft. We were walking among the heather, very cautiously, within half a mile of the house, when we heard voices. It was quite dark, and we dropped upon our knees behind a great boulder of granite. Then we heard the voice of this man Dent, the caretaker's son. He was speaking to a stranger. What he said was that the two young men from London had got tired of their job and had returned. The telegram had been intercepted, as I intended it should be. The answering voice was that of a

foreigner—it was too dark to see his face, but it is a thousand to one he was a Japanese.

"‘Thank you,’ it said, and we heard the chink of money passing. ‘Then now the coast is clear. We have all information about Miss Vincent being in York, together with that box which we want to get hold of. We were not deceived at all by the clever plan of the second motor with the dummy box. We nearly got the original box, but not quite. These young men from London are smart, and it is a good thing they are frightened out of their lives and have fled.’ ‘Any more instructions?’ Dent asked. ‘Nothing to-night. Meet me here upon the moor at the same time tomorrow.’

“We followed young Dent,” Charlie continued, “until, just under the light of the big gate, we saw who he was. We then went round to the back of the house, swam the moat, and managed to get into the butler’s pantry—the window of which was not closed. We had hardly done so when Brice entered, and, to cut a long story short, here we are.”

Without a word Sir Philip jumped up from his chair and went across to the tied, gagged figure upon the floor.

"And what do you propose to do with this?" he said in an icy voice.

"Oh, cut his throat, of course," snapped Wag.

The wretched Dent's body gave a spasmodic writhe.

"It would serve him right," Sir Philip said. "I paid for his education myself at a school in York. His father has been a servant of mine for many years. This carrion," he touched the trussed-up youth with his boot, "has always been an idle wastrel. Now I find him in secret treaty with my enemies."

"Brice suggests the wine cellar," Charlie said. "Wag will look after him. He won't see daylight again until, until—we all do!"

"The best thing," Sir Philip agreed.

Charlie went to the door and called softly for Brice.

The butler entered, and he and Wag carried the prisoner from the room.

"I will be back in half an hour, Charlie," Wag said as he closed the door.

Sir Philip and Charlie were left alone.

"My boy," the elder man said, "I want to make a confession."

"And that is——?"

"That when I got your telegram I did not realise that it was a ruse. I felt that you and your friend had deserted me. 'The horrors that surround Ravenscroft,' I thought, 'have unnerved my new friends, and they have fled.' Forgive me."

Charlie bowed. Even in the extraordinary clothes he wore, with dirty face and bruised hands, upon which there were blood stains, he looked very unlike a tramp.

"Sir," he replied, "what you thought was very natural. You have been surrounded by treachery and by unscrupulous enemies till you could hardly avoid distrusting everyone."

"Then, my dear lad, you won't think anything of what I have said?"

"Not for an instant. I, too, have a confession to make, Sir Philip."

Charlie felt in his tattered coat, and withdrew an envelope. "Muriel has sent that to you, Sir Philip."

The baronet opened the letter. His face showed no expression whatever. The letter contained no more than ten lines, yet he was a full

six minutes reading and re-reading it. At length he folded it up and put it in the pocket of the shooting coat he was wearing.

Then he lifted his head and stared Charlie full in the eyes. The man's face seemed suddenly to become concentrated. His heart, his mind, his very soul fixed in one long beaming scrutiny. It was as though some great light-house had suddenly lit its thousand lamps and turned them full upon one single point.

"My daughter writes to me that she loves you?"

"I am a very happy man."

"She tells me that she has promised to marry you if, by your help, we and the great principle I have at heart are saved?"

"And I am going to do it, Sir Philip," came the quiet answer.

There was a minute of dead silence in the room, only broken by the crisp noise of a falling coal in the fireplace beyond.

"By George, I believe you are!"

The two men clasped hands. "And if you do you will be worthy even of Muriel. I believe in you. I have no son now; perhaps—perhaps——"

"Muriel is safe for the time," Charlie said. "The enemies' suspicions are lulled. Their activities will be directed at you and not at her."

"And your activities, Penrose?"

"I think friend Wag is at the door, Sir Philip. We have discussed everything. Our plans are duly made. Wag has been getting my kit together."

The door opened, and Wag Ashton entered. He was now dressed in ordinary clothes, washed and clean, a great contrast to his dirty and dishevelled friend. In his arms he carried a large bundle and several other separate objects.

"Here you are, Charlie," he said briskly, "here is the whole fit out."

"Fit out? Fit out for what?" Sir Philip asked.

"For my attempt, my attack upon Helston Castle," Charlie answered. "To-night we carry war into the enemy's quarters. To-night I am going to Helston Castle alone. Ashton will remain here with you, Sir Philip. He knows what to do. If I go to death, then it must be so, but I think not. I shall win my inestimable prize; you will accomplish your life work."

Wag Ashton became busy over the various objects he had laid upon the table.

“Now, Charlie, my boy,” he said, “there ain’t much time to lose. Let’s get to business! Gentlemen always return a call as soon as possible. The poor dear Raven will be feeling lonely!”

## CHAPTER VIII

How dark the moor was! How black the vast pile of Helston Castle rising among the heather.

To the left, quarter of a mile from the mass of buildings, was a long, lonely tarn, in which the stars were reflected like spangles upon jet. This was almost the only light, save for one red window in the Castle, which showed beaconlike upon the moor.

The night was deadly still and bitter cold as Charlie Penrose crept cautiously towards the sombre mass which held within it a secret unguessed at by the world, hideous and malignant forces in active play and movement against all the young man cared for, and against the welfare of England

Charlie wore a close-fitting grey jersey, and over it an inconspicuous Norfolk shooting jacket. His trousers were of thick grey flannel; his boots, once of white buckskin, had been blacked over, and the soles were of thick india-rubber, utterly noiseless wherever he might walk.

In one pocket was a Browning automatic pistol containing eight cartridges. He had another clip of eight in case of necessity. He was provided with an electric flash torch and various tools and implements which might be necessary for him to break into the Castle. Wag Ashton had seen to everything. He had made Charlie take a big silver flask of Sir Philip's which contained brandy and water, and also a tin box of beef lozenges, as it might be a considerable time before the daring intruder could obtain food. And Charlie's equipment was finally completed by loosening the dark lining of the cap he was wearing and cutting two eye holes in it, so that it might be pulled down over his face in an instant.

Wag Ashton had arranged all this while Charlie had been talking alone with Sir Philip. The young man was sent out as well equipped as any burglar. A burglar he was indeed. He was about to incur the severest penalties of the law. Upon pure suspicion he was going to make an attempt to enter this frowning castle of a mysterious peer of whom nothing was known. Yet he knew very well that if he was discovered he would never stand in the dock in any assizes.

The war between the unknown Lord Helston and Sir Philip Vincent was above the law—had no part in ordinary social justice.

Umataro had been foully murdered. Umataro had been quietly buried by Sir Philip without a word to the police.

The great black motor-car from the Castle had attempted to wreck Sir Philip's car. The attempt had been foiled by a lucky pistol shot—but all the folk of Ravenscroft knew that no appeal would ever be made to the law.

It was a fight hand to hand, a fight in which Society had no part, and the amateur burglar, as he drew nearer and nearer to Helston Castle, knew that he carried his life in his hands and that his life was probably worth a little less than nothing at that moment.

But he did not care. He had already endured too much to care about himself. And, above all, he was animated by two purposes which glowed within him like hidden lamps—lamps that only Death itself could extinguish. He was working for England—the country of his birth, the country for which his father had fought and bled in three campaigns. He was working for Muriel, that peerless girl who loved him. If he succeeded

in his desperate mission he would win all that life could possibly hold for many a greater man than he.

His whole soul was strung up to endeavour. Fear, even the possibility of fear, had left him. He was, as it were, throwing dice with the devil, and even in such a dreadful encounter he was certain of success.

He was not certain by any means of personal success. He might not win Muriel after all. But he felt utterly sure that whatever might befall, he would confound the unknown enemies of Sir Philip and his plan—and he felt that he could die gladly if that alone were accomplished.

A desperate man was approaching Helston Castle; a man who, though he wished to live, was not afraid to die.

Such a man—history has proved it over and over again—can accomplish anything. Kings and emperors have fallen before a single human agency so utterly resolved as this.

He had traversed the mile or two that lay between the two great houses, and was now right up against the Castle. There was not a sound upon the moor but the distant hooting of an owl; the Castle itself seemed almost uninhabited ex-

cept for the one red window high above. Helston was an ancient, enormous building with a huge central keep, two round flanking towers and high walls encircling the outer courtyard—walls which were now covered with ivy and fallen into decay. Attached to the more ancient building was a Tudor house with a long façade facing the southern portion of the moor. This alone was inhabited, as Charlie had learned. It was at this point that he must attempt an entrance.

Wag Ashton had supplied him with all the details the little pugilist could glean from the members of the Ravenscroft household. Charlie had a rough plan of the Castle in his mind, but all details were wanting. Few people approached the vast and sinister building upon the moor. Some years before it had been absolutely closed to tourists and archeologists. For many miles round the countryside the place was held in ill-repute. The owner, whom no one had ever seen, was known to be served entirely by Asiatics. Supplies arrived from some of the great stores in London, and local produce—eggs, milk, meat, and the like—were brought from York in motor-cars. Although Ravenscroft was little more than a mile away from this castle of ill-omen, the

resident servants there could only supply the most scanty information. Few people ever went near the Castle at any time; after dark it was shunned like the plague.

"This is all in my favour," Charlie thought as he paused for a minute or two on the very edge of the grounds. "The Castle is fenced about with a wall of superstition and dislike which has rendered it as impenetrable as steel to all ordinary folk. The people there certainly do not expect any retaliation from Ravenscroft. They believe Ashton and myself to have returned to London—so far everything goes well."

It was with some such thoughts as these in his mind that Charlie came up against the six-foot sunken wall, which kept the terraced gardens of the more modern part of the Castle from the moor. He brushed through the last yard of withered, crackling heather. Above him was a six-foot rampart of granite which gave immediately upon the last terrace of all. There was no fence upon the top, he had merely to draw himself up by his hands—an easy thing enough—and he found himself upon a long level sweep of short turf, the blades of which crackled like needles of glass on a frosty night.

The moon was almost due to rise. It was a waxing moon not yet come to more than half maturity, and he waited for it, lying flat upon the turf and indistinguishable from it, for nearly ten minutes. But as he lay, and before the first horn of the moon rose over the highest portion of the moor, his eyes became accustomed to the starlight and he could see the great house before him with more distinctness.

He was lying upon the last terrace of all, from where a series of stone steps with ornamental balustrade went up from terrace to terrace till the last broad gravel space around the house was reached. There was nothing to stop him. Within a minute and a half he could be standing under the tall, mullioned windows of the lower part of the house. But he waited for the first moon rays.

The place seemed so boldly without defence, so open to all comers, that it might well be protected in curious and startling ways. The subtle ingenuity which could kidnap in Park Lane and murder in Ravenscroft might well have cunning and unsuspected terrors!

As the moon rose, and its first pulsing white rays fell upon the Castle, Charlie ran noiselessly up terrace after terrace until he was actually

crouching against the wall of the house. His feet made no noise upon the finely gravelled walk as he passed rapidly along the whole front from end to end.

The long windows of the ground floor were heavily shuttered outside. Examination proved that the shutters were perfectly fitted and were of teak or some wood equally hard. Charlie took his knife from his pocket and endeavoured to make a cut—he was utterly unable to do so. In the centre of the façade was the great entrance door. It was studded with iron nails at intervals of an inch, and the most expert burglar would have done no more than blunt his tools if he had worked upon it for a week.

The mullioned windows of the second floor were quite thirty feet above. The moonlight showed that these also were heavily shuttered. The old red brick of Elizabethan times had not decayed at all. There was no porch to the central door. There were no projections in the brick work which might enable him to climb upwards. And even if he did—

Yet on the third floor a long, large window still glowed with light. Upon the moor the light had seemed red, now, as Charlie noiselessly re-

treated to the edge of the terrace and looked upwards, it was vivid orange. There was no way of climbing up to it, and even if there were, such an act would be madness. For a moment a sense of deep discouragement possessed him.

He went up to the stern, frowning wall and leant against it, sick at heart. Was this to be the end of his endeavour? Willing to dare his very life for Muriel's sake, was he to return like a whipped dog because of shuttered windows and a high brick wall? A sense of the utter futility of life—of his life in particular—struck to his very marrow with a chill a thousand times greater than the cold and icy air of this winter's night. He had always been a failure. On the night when he had been dismissed from the picture palace in Oxford Street and had met the softly speaking Japanese, it had seemed that at last Fate had given him some worthy work to do, and that success might yet be his. He was sick to death with disappointment. He was not afraid; he only knew the old agonising helplessness.

But in a few seconds more, as he leant against the wall, limp and purposeless, he experienced fear—fear which sent the blood like fire through his veins, chilled it again in an instant, set his

hands trembling, and damped his face with icy sweat.

Suddenly, without any preparation, he heard a great chord of music far above him, coming, he did not doubt, from the great lit window.

The music was like the sudden striking of a hundred harps. It was utterly sweet, ineffably sad. All the music of the ages and all the agonies of haunting despairs were combined in the ringing, twanging chords which pulsed out into the night. The volume of sound was immense—terrifying in its immensity. It was as though an orchestra of lost souls was playing in the palace of Satan. For one, two—ten seconds this unearthly harmony flooded out over his head, as the beams of a great lighthouse flash above one who crouches at its foot. Then there was an abrupt cessation. The outside air hummed and vibrated with the sound, but the music itself had ceased. The vibration was like a flight of wasps speeding away into the moonlight, until only a faint echo of it remained.

Mentally stunned, nerveless, and limp, Charlie clung to the stone sill of the long, shuttered window by which he had been standing. His

hands were slippery with perspiration, and slid upon the stone.

Then the Voice began. . . .

Pealing, ringing, crashing, the Voice was uplifted in demoniac song.

It was a deep, bass voice, deeper than any human voice the listener had ever heard. The immense volume of sound could only be compared to the deepest pedal of some great cathedral organ—the enormous double C that Charlie had once heard in St. Paul's. And yet it was no mechanical production of huge wooden pipe and artificial wind. It was a human voice; at least it was the voice of something that lived. It is in the high ringing notes of tenor or soprano that we are accustomed to hear and recognise pain and deep emotion. But this was that deep, rich thunderous bass which in ordinary life we associate with the song of conquerors, the commands of tyrants, or leading a carouse in some baronial hall.

Yet what Charlie heard, flattened against the wall, pressed into the masonry by the cruel hand of Fear, was as doleful, dreary, and despairing as the unearthly music which preceded it. Thus some giant with a soul, some mighty monster in

hideous torment of spirit might pour out its gigantic agonies.

There was a tune—a definite air, a strange rhythmic sequence of two phrases. Horribly unnatural and heart-piercing as it was, it was nevertheless intensely musical. And there were words too—Charlie could distinguish that—though they were words which had no meaning for him, and were in a language that he did not know.

Then, as a door is slammed, the Voice ceased abruptly. There was only the moonlight washing the moor with silver, and the echo of a little breeze that whispered and eddied round the towers of the Castle.

“Have I come to a house of devils?” the young man asked himself. “Is it true what one has read of the mysterious enchantments of the East? Is that horrible black bird a real thing after all?”

Mechanically his hand sank into the side pocket of his coat. It touched the cold stock of the automatic pistol. The chill upon his finger-tips acted curiously. This, at any rate, was real, he himself was real, he was vowed to the service of a lovely lady and a great cause. He heard again the parting words of staunch little Wag, “Gentlemen

always return a call as quickly as possible; the poor dear Raven will be feeling lonely."

Then he did the wisest thing possible. He took the flask from his inner pocket and drank. The old cognac put new life into him, restored all his courage. It didn't matter now what was inside this pile of mystery. It was still his business to find out. He began to think quickly and logically. The newer portion of the Castle, by which he stood, built in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, was the only inhabited portion. The great mass of building behind was half in ruins, but it was obvious there must be some communication between the Tudor and the Norman structures.

He went to see.

Walking noiselessly as a cat, in and out of bright passages of moonlight and darkest shadows, he skirted the inhabited wing, and came at length to a round, ivy-covered tower which was at the side. The tower was still in a state of excellent preservation, but some forty feet above his head was a large rounded embrasure. As the moon swung upwards it shone directly into this glassless, unbarred window.

Well, here at any rate was an opportunity.

An active man, willing to run risks, could easily climb up there; and the thought had no sooner come into his mind than he was at work upon the business. The ivy branches were as thick as the branches of an ordinary tree. They formed a natural ladder towards the airy window above. He climbed upwards, making as few sounds as he could. Once, when he hung midway between his goal and the ground below, he almost lost his foothold. There was a sudden terrifying flutter of wings, a hoarse cry as something flashed by him. He felt the air of its passage upon his face, but almost instantly he knew what it was. He had disturbed a great owl from its lair, and he heard it going hooting away into the night. It was touch and go. He nearly fell, but this physical encounter nerved him to fresh efforts, and in no time he had hauled himself up and stood upon a solid floor of oak in the upper chamber of the turret. The place was empty and silent. It was now flooded by moonlight. To his left there was a low arch leading down a narrow passage in the thick stone wall.

Without a moment's hesitation he bent his head and crept into the blackness. There was just space for his body. Raising his hand he felt

a roof of stone not two inches above his head. It was a passage in the thickness of the Castle walls.

Feeling his way with the greatest care, he went on for some ten yards. Then he stopped to listen.

The air was miasmic and heavy. There was a mouldering smell in his nostrils; more than once in his progress a bat squeaked and flitted past him. There was no other sound, and at last he cautiously withdrew the electric torch from his pocket and pulled down the catch.

What he saw was this. He was standing in an incredibly narrow passage of roughly hewn stone. His shoulders almost touched the walls on either side, and the walls themselves were stained with lichens and dripping damp. Immediately before him the passage broadened out into a sort of tiny chamber, windowless and unventilated. The floor was of stone, and covered with the little white bones of the small moor flocks which the owls, who haunted the place, had brought there. But exactly in front was a big door, covered with raised metal bosses, which showed here and there among its covering of damp and mildewed moss.

For a moment Charlie thought that he had come to the end of nowhere, but as the white radiance of his torch flashed hither and thither, his heart leapt up. The door was secured by a heavy padlock, and the padlock was new. The brass parts bore the name of a famous Birmingham firm, but it was clasped into a staple of rusted iron which would surely yield.

In a moment he realised what this meant. The people of Helston Castle had never anticipated any reprisals from Ravenscroft or anywhere else. This door of the ancient part of the building had been secured by the most ordinary means. It was obvious—and here Charlie made a swift calculation of the direction in which he had come—that this door opened into the newer part of the house.

With a chuckle he produced a thin bar of tempered steel with which Wag had supplied him. "They haven't troubled," he thought to himself; "they have believed this to be absolutely secure. It is only school days over again. The bully never takes precautions, because he thinks he is invulnerable—here goes!"

Under his powerful pressure the staple came out without the slightest noise. The padlock fell, and Charlie pulled the door. It opened towards

him, and he saw that it was full three inches thick.

"Clever," he said to himself. "Here is a door that nothing but dynamite would have blown up, and they secure it by a four-and-six-penny Birmingham padlock. It is always so in life. Overconfidence has been the ruin of many a better man than Lord Helston. There is a weak point in the armour of everyone, and in this case I seem to have found it."

The light of the torch showed him that he was in a bare room of small size. The walls were covered with rotting wooden panelling. There was an old table and three or four chairs pushed into a corner. He knew at once that his surmise had been correct, that he was now in the more modern part of the Castle. The door in front of him was locked from the other side. It was an easy matter to push back the hasp, but he took the precaution to oil the rusty mechanism before he did so, to switch off his flashlight, and to open the door with the greatest possible caution.

There was not a sound. Before him, lit by a lamp of bronze, round which dragons curled, was a wide corridor. The walls were hung with priceless Japanese colour prints in frames of thin gold. His feet trod upon a soft carpet of tawny red and

faded blue. Large doors of polished wood were on each side of this corridor which was as wide as a room. In the middle of it was a carved table of ebony, upon which stood a hugh bowl of Satsuma enamel. The light from the bronze lamp fell upon the jewelled glories of its sides, and it was filled with sulphur-coloured winter roses from some hot-house.

Charlie was, at last, in the very stronghold of the unknown.

His teeth clenched, his eyes watchful, his ears greedy for the slightest noise, he crept onwards. In his left hand he held the electric torch, in his right was the modern automatic pistol which could fire eight shots in two seconds.

His progress was as noiseless as that of a jaguar stalking its prey. He passed door after door of polished wood. A warm, scented atmosphere surrounded him. He was in the secret home of great luxury—that was immediately apparent. He had passed from the ruined, owl-haunted chamber of the turret, down the passage, and into a place where the last word of modern comfort had been spoken.

“They are real then, these people,” he thought to himself. “I am in the house of mystery,

possibly the place of horrors, but the enemies with whom I have to deal are flesh and blood."

He stopped, stiffened suddenly, and crouched against the left hand wall of the corridor.

The light of the bronze lamp was now a considerable way behind him; he had come to where its rays but hardly penetrated, and where the heavy aromatic odours seemed to wrap him round like curtains. And, not three yards before him, a band of orange light cut like a wedge into the darkness.

The light came from a door upon his left, a door that was ajar.

He heard the murmur of voices.

Gripping his pistol more firmly in his hand, he crept onwards. He heard a voice that he knew, that he knew very well indeed.

"It was neatly done. The young ruffians tied me up—with telephone wire, if you please!" There was a soft chuckling. "It was pure coincidence, of course, that this young Penrose and his friend, who, I have ascertained, is a professional boxer, and who even knows jiu-jitsu, ever met the Vincents again. I am afraid when I instructed the chauffeur to drive Miss Vincent

round London after her little experience in Park Lane I didn't allow for every possibility."

Charlie's breath was almost strangled in his throat. He knew who was talking. The voice was the voice of the Japanese gentleman who had accosted him outside the cinema theatre in Oxford Street.

There was a deep musical reply.

Again the listener was thrilled to the foundations of his being. The voice that spoke was the voice that had so lately rung in musical agony into the quiet night. It was different now; it was toned down to the pitch of ordinary speech, but it was still incredibly rich—commanding.

"I am sorry, Yoshida."

"You need not be. I bear no malice. I work for the Cause, and as you know now, these two misguided young men have fled for London to-night. They got rather more than they bargained for yesterday, according to your own account!"

"They did, and Ravenscroft is now waiting for——"

"For what, Prince?"

"I will tell you to-morrow," the beautiful voice concluded. "Ravenscroft shall have a respite to-night, and as for its owner—look!"

"We will go to bed," came the voice of the Japanese that Charlie knew.

There was a sound of laughter, musically blended, the hissing noise of feet moving over some smooth surface—perhaps the noise of Oriental slippers upon some carpet woven of grass—then a final word.

"The lights? Shall I turn them out, Prince?"

"Why?" the organ voice replied. "What does it matter? My electricians know well that they must always have reserve of power. No, while we sleep the lights shall shine down upon——"

Charlie heard no more, save the crisp closing and locking of a door far away at the other end of the room.

His moment had come.

He rose from his stooping posture, took three silent steps, and pushed open the heavy mahogany door from which the yellow light had cut into the blackness.

He stood aghast. He found himself in a huge room, so brilliantly lit, so wonderful in its splendid colours and marvellous decoration, that it struck upon the eye like a blow from a hand of gold. The Arabian Nights? Here were sud-

denly seen glories which the brain could hardly realise.

And then—and then—Charlie sank to the ground with a low cry of horror.

Three yards away, bound tightly with ropes, seated in a chair, his face a mask of tortured horror and with gouts of blood upon it, was Sir Philip Vincent!

## CHAPTER IX

“WELL, I think your brother is a fool,” General Yeoland said to his wife, as he rose from the breakfast table. “All this confounded nonsense and imagination about persecution and intrigues and all that.”

“Philip is not generally thought to be a fool,” the General’s wife answered.

“You know what I mean,” was the irritable reply. “Of course he was a successful Ambassador to Japan; he is a distinguished man in the public eye, and so forth, but all this present nonsense simply annoys me. It is my private opinion that Philip Vincent got a touch of the sun a good many years ago when he was out East, and that his son’s mysterious murder—though I always thought that it looked like a suicide, by Jove!—has simply turned him into a nervous old woman.”

General Sir Thomas Yeoland, V.C., D.S.O., etc. etc., was already in uniform, for there was a big parade, and the Commander-in-Chief of the

Eastern Army Corps must inspect the various units.

The tall, elderly man with the grey waxed moustache was in an ill-temper. He grumbled as he gulped down his cup of coffee, caught up his sword and sabretache, and stamped out into the hall, where two slim young aides-de-camp were waiting.

He gave them a few curt directions, and then put his head once more into the breakfast-room.

"Well, good-bye, Maria," he said. "Goodness knows when I shall be back. What are you going to do?"

"This morning I shall be shopping," said Lady Yeoland, "and in the afternoon Muriel and I are going for a walk."

"Very well, but do try and knock all this nonsense out of the girl's head. I am dashed fond of Muriel, as you know, but she seems all on wires. Your silly brother has been infecting her with his own superstitions. I am damned if I believe that Ravenscroft is haunted or anything of the sort—your brother's an ass, Maria!"

The door banged, there was a clinking and clattering of swords and spears beyond, and shortly Lady Yeoland heard the pawing of

horses' feet upon the gravel sweep outside the house, as the orderlies brought up the charges and the officers mounted and trotted away to the Barrack Square.

It was eight o'clock in the morning. Dawn had only just begun; the long, luxurious breakfast-room was lit by lamps, and only a faint grey winter's light came in from the long French windows. A huge fire burned upon the hearth. A young footman entered and began to remove silver breakfast dishes.

"Breakfast at nine, my lady?" he asked in a deferential voice.

"Yes, Charles, at nine. Miss Muriel will be down then. Has the post arrived yet?"

"Not yet, my lady."

"Oh, I am going upstairs. When it does arrive tell Jenkins to bring the bag to me at once."

"Thank you, my lady. It should be here in twenty minutes now, if the London train has not been delayed by the fog."

Lady Yeoland, who was wearing a loose, fur-lined morning wrapper, rose from the breakfast table and went to her boudoir upon the first floor. She always made a point of coming down to see

that her husband had his breakfast in comfort upon days when big military evolutions were afoot. Now she gave a sigh of relief as she entered the cosy little sitting-room which adjoined her bedroom.

Lady Yeoland was not a popular woman. Together with the wife of the Archbishop of York, and two or three other great ladies, she was at the head of official society in the largest county in England. Of irreproachable descent—a sister of our late Ambassador to Japan, wife of one of the best liked soldiers of the day, who had distinguished himself in the Boer War by his brilliant cavalry tactics, a woman of handsome and commanding presence, one would have thought that the Fates had given her almost everything.

Yet she was not popular. Everybody acknowledged that she was a devoted wife to her husband; everyone admitted that her social tact and her leadership of society were both beyond criticism. Nevertheless, no one seemed—to use a homely phrase—"to get any nearer to her." She baffled people. She seemed to be a woman with reserves which no one had ever been allowed to penetrate. With a hundred friends, she had

no intimates, and even Muriel, her nearest feminine relation by blood—the Yeolands had no children—felt that she could never really love her aunt, though the two were the greatest friends, and there was at least a show of extreme intimacy between them.

Lady Yeoland's maid came out of the bedroom and assisted her mistress to complete her toilet.

"Be sure, Briggs, that the post-bag is brought up to me directly it arrives."

"Thank you, my lady, it should be here now. I will go and see."

Briggs left the boudoir and went into the corridor. An adjacent door opened, and a pretty girl in a dress of dark grey came out, closing the door softly behind her.

It was Jane Gregory, Muriel Vincent's maid.

"Hallo, Jane!"

"Hallo, Flo, what are you doing?"

"Going down to see if the post has come," Lady Yeoland's maid answered. "She seems anxious about it this morning, wants to have the letters up at once."

"Well, I'm on the same job, dear, if you ask me. Miss Muriel wants her letters too. She's

just as restless as she can be, and I don't believe she slept at all last night."

"Something up, you may depend upon that," Briggs remarked philosophically.

Jane Gregory looked at her new friend and seemed half inclined to speak, but thought better of it and shut her mouth. And as the two girls descended the stairs into the hall, Jane thought that she could tell a story that would considerably surprise and interest the demure Florence. Jane also expected a letter from a certain agile little professor of pugilism, physical culture, and jiu-jitsu, but she had been warned to tell nothing of the strange occurrences at Ravenscroft to anyone in the house of General Sir Thomas Yeoland.

The post-bag arrived as the two went down into the hall.

"What about Miss Muriel?" Jane said.

"My lady has the key, dear," Briggs answered, "so you must wait a minute or two until the bag is unlocked."

"Very well," the other answered, and in a moment more Briggs was in Lady Yeoland's boudoir.

"You can go now, Briggs."

"Yes, my lady. If you please, my lady, Miss Muriel is expecting a letter; I have just seen her maid."

"I shall be down in the breakfast-room in five minutes, tell Miss Muriel."

Briggs left the room.

Lady Yeoland unlocked the private post-bag which an orderly brought three times a day from the general post office in the city. With her firm white hands—they were extraordinarily capable and prehensile—she sorted the letters as if she were dealing a hand at cards. A little pile for Sir Thomas showed up upon the table. There were one or two for various members of the household—the residential aide-de-camp, one or two for the servants, and one thick, large envelope for Lady Yeoland, and another, in handwriting resembling her own letter, for Muriel Vincent.

The strong white hands slit open the large envelope with a tiny silver paper knife. Lady Yeoland withdrew a letter written in firm, clear, but rather angular script. It bore the heading, embossed in black, RAVENSCROFT HOUSE, HEAMOOR, YORK.

She glanced through the letter, nodded her

head two or three times as if with inward satisfaction. Then she did a curious thing. She went to a little ebony writing-table in the corner of the boudoir, and took a large reading glass from one of its drawers. Coming back to the table she scrutinised the signature of the letter under the magnifying glass. Then she nodded once more.

She put back the letter in the envelope and withdrew from it another enclosure. There was a half-sheet of notepaper, thin and crackling—it seemed like foreign paper. Upon it was a series of odd little squares and angles, interspersed here and there with a series of numbers.

She unhooked a little gold pencil from the chatelaine at her belt, frowned, bent over the table with great concentration, and began to write letter after letter above the symbols upon the page.

Obviously Lady Yeoland was a woman of business-like habits and quick decision. She decoded the cipher from memory, not waiting to gather its full meaning until she had got it in plain English. Then when this was finished she sat back in her chair and read the communication with the greatest care. She read it once, she

read it twice, and then she walked to the fire and carefully burnt it.

Upon a trivet by the fire was a little copper kettle from which the steam was pouring in a thin, feathery jet—the night before Lady Yeoland had told her maid that she had been suffering from indigestion lately, and that the doctor had ordered her a glass of hot water before taking the first meal. Hence the little kettle.

Lady Yeoland passed into her bedroom, and returned in a moment or two with a tumbler of cut glass. She nearly filled the glass with hot water from the kettle. Hot water in the early morning is a well-known cure for digestive troubles; perhaps Lady Yeoland's indigestion had now departed, for she certainly did not drink the boiling fluid. Instead of doing so, she took up the letter addressed to Miss Muriel Vincent—which bore the same handwriting as the one she had just opened—and deliberately proceeded to steam the flap of the envelope.

In two minutes the flap curled up. In three seconds the strong white hands had withdrawn the enclosed letter.

Lady Yeoland read it carefully. When she had done so her face, which had been slightly

contracted and anxious, smoothed itself again into its usual expression of somewhat stony calm. Lady Yeoland seemed relieved. But, as she replaced the letter in its envelope and deftly stuck it down with a little brush of gum from the writing-table, Lady Yeoland's finely arched brows went up, her firm mouth contracted, and she gave a curious whistle of surprise.

A towel pressed upon the letter for a few seconds restored it to its original appearance. It was replaced in the post-bag with the other letters. Lady Yeoland left her boudoir and descended to the breakfast-room, carrying the bag in her hand.

It was now full winter's morning—a grey day without any appeal whatever, but still morning. The lamps which had been put upon the breakfast table for the General's early meal had been removed. Flowers from the conservatory had been cut by the gardener and placed upon the table. The fire was remade, the place was comfortable and cosy, and bore no traces of its recent occupation by the irritable warrior, who was even now clanking over the moor with his staff, and who would have much rather been sitting

down to cutlets and devilled kidneys at a little after nine.

"Here are the letters, Charles," Lady Yeoland said, giving them to the footman. "There are four for the office—three for Captain Osborne and one for Major Dobbin. Here are the servants' letters, and, let me see"—she dealt the letters to herself musingly—"oh yes, one for me, and six, seven, for Sir Thomas; and—ah yes—one for Miss Vincent."

The footman bowed, put the letters upon a tray, and hurried from the room.

He had not been gone for a moment when the door opened and Muriel came in.

Muriel wore a skirt of Harris tweed check and a flannel blouse of dark red. She looked perfectly tailored, absolutely charming and self-possessed as she came in and kissed her aunt. An acute observer, however, might have discerned a certain anxiety in the grey eyes which flitted over the flowers, glass, and silver of the breakfast table.

"Had a good night, Muriel?" Lady Yeoland said in her brisk, bright voice, a voice in which people said there was always something a little metallic, "had a good night?" And then not

waiting for a reply, "Letter for you from Ravenscroft."

It is not too much to say that Muriel darted to the other side of the table. She sat down, tore open the envelope, and then put it quietly by the side of her plate as Charles entered and began to serve breakfast.

"Devilled kidneys, miss?"

"No."

"Scrambled eggs and mushrooms, miss?"

"No—I mean yes, anything, Charles."

"Very good, miss." The young man did his duties and went away.

Lady Yeoland was occupied in reading a letter of her own. Muriel read also. The lady at the head of the table, with a quick, oblique glance, noticed that the hands of her niece were trembling.

This was what Muriel read:

"**MY DARLING**,—Charlie Penrose has told me everything that happened yesterday when you were driving with him to York. I have waited the day before writing to you. I am not going to send you any long letter now, but I send you my love and my blessing, for I know that you

will have been waiting to hear from me. Muriel, he is a splendid fellow! Since poor Anthony's death I have never taken to anyone in the same way as I have done to Charlie. I say Charlie, because I know now that you love him and he loves you. I could not wish a better husband for my daughter, and I give your engagement my sanction. He has told me all about his people I am no stickler for social proprieties—I have lived too long in the world not to know how hollow such distinctions are. Still I am glad that the man of your choice is of our own rank. Of the strange way in which he has come into our lives, I can say nothing more than that I believe the guiding hand of Providence has been at work.

"And now, my dearest girl, I will tell you that the chivalrous and splendid devotion of the man whom I hope will one day be your husband has resulted in the definite carrying out of the plan that was hinted to you before. Charlie has gone. He went to Helston Castle, fully equipped for a dangerous undertaking by his quaint little friend, Mr. Ashton, last night. He has done it for you, dear, and yet I believe he has done it for England also. I feel the greatest confidence in him. I am more hopeful and de-

termined than I have ever been. Charles Penrose will discover the precise nature of the controlling mind which has persecuted us for so long.

“All my love, my dearest daughter, all my love, your father,

“PHILIP VINCENT.”

“Interesting letter, Muriel?”

Muriel started. Her aunt’s sharp, cold voice cut into her joy and anxiety. The girl’s mind was in a whirl of sensation. To know that her father approved of her strangely sudden engagement to an almost stranger made her whole being tremble. To know that Charlie had disappeared into the unknown, bravely fighting hideous phantoms—if indeed they were phantoms—for her sake, stabbed the girl’s heart with icy apprehension, even in the moment of her joy.

“Yes, aunt?”

“Interesting letter, I said, Muriel? You seem dreamy; didn’t you sleep well?”

Muriel made a great effort, and recovered her composure.

"Not very well, aunt. I suppose it was the new place, don't you know?"

"Well, it may be. I have noticed the same thing myself when I have been changing houses, but you will sleep better to-night."

"I hope so," Muriel replied. What was it, some trick of the grey morning light, or did she see a curious gleam flash and fade in Lady Yeoland's eyes?

"Well, what are you going to do this morning? Your uncle has gone off on a big review, and there will be manœuvres afterwards. He won't be home until dinner-time this evening. I want to do a good deal of shopping in York—like to come?"

Muriel noticed that her aunt's invitation was only perfunctory. She was glad of it. She wanted to be alone to think everything over.

"Well, if you don't mind, aunt, I think I'll just potter about by myself this morning."

She did not notice that there was a note of relief in her aunt's voice as she replied, "Very well then, we will meet at lunch. There is an organ recital in the Minster if you like to go. A couple of tickets came last night. It is not a general public affair, in fact it is a rehearsal for next

Sunday, but still you might like to pass an hour away hearing Dr. Passhe trying over his fugues."

"Just what I should like, auntie," Muriel responded eagerly. The idea appealed to her at once. Wrapped in furs, hidden behind some great column of the Minster while the massive harmonies of the great organist pealed out under the vaulted roofs, she knew that she would find peace of mind and time for deep consideration.

"Very well then, lunch at half-past one. But this afternoon, Muriel, you must go for a good brisk walk with me. I shall be driving about the city all the morning, and I must get some exercise before your uncle returns."

"I shall be very glad, auntie, after lunch."

The two ladies rose from the breakfast table and went their several ways in the big, luxurious house.

About half-past eleven Lady Yeoland's brougham stopped outside the Capital and Yorkshire Bank in the High Street. Charles, the footman, jumped down from the box, opened the door, and the commanding officer's wife, in her heavy sable coat and muff, entered the bank.

The pale clerk at the counter bowed deferentially.

"I want to see Mr. Tracey," said Lady Yeoland, mentioning the name of the manager.

"Certainly, my lady, certainly," the clerk said, "one moment." He hastened to an inner room, was only gone a second or two, and then bowed politely, lifted up the counter flap, opened a door, and ushered Lady Yeoland down a short passage into the manager's room.

Mr. Tracey, the manager, was a slim, middle-aged man with a pointed beard turning grey. He was standing to receive his distinguished visitor. Sir Thomas Yeoland was a very wealthy man. The garrison accounts were all kept at the C.Y.B. Sir Philip Vincent had a large local account; Lady Yeoland was a client to be received like a princess.

The tall, handsome woman with the firm white hands and curious, enigmatic expression was singularly gracious this morning. She shook the manager's hand with great cordiality. It was an extraordinary condescension.

"Well, Mr. Tracey," she said, fumbling in her muff and withdrawing a letter, "the little precautions that my husband asked you to make two days ago are no longer necessary."

"You mean about the chest that was deposited in the vaults, Lady Yeoland?"

"Exactly; you can dismiss the special policemen, and the sentry will be taken away this afternoon. The matter was purely a temporary one."

"Quite so, Lady Yeoland. You have of course——"

"Here is my brother's authorisation," she said, holding out a letter stamped with the Ravenscroft heading and the Vincent crest.

The manager took it and read as follows:

"DEAR MARIA,—The necessity for specially guarding the box which my agent deposited at the C.Y.B. is now over, and I should be glad to have it again. Thank Thomas very much for helping me in the matter. I can't explain why, but you may take it from me that the precautions were really necessary, though they are now no longer so. Please take this to Mr. Tracey and instruct him to deliver the box to my Japanese servant, Umataro, who will call for it during the afternoon and give a receipt."

Mr. Tracey looked up. "Certainly, certainly," he beamed. "Sir Philip's man will come

for the box some time during the day. I see, I see. I hope your ladyship and Sir Thomas are very well?"

"Quite well, thank you, Mr. Tracey. Oh, by the way, you know that in a fortnight's time the Hussars and the Carabineers are giving a fancy-dress ball, might I send you and Mrs. Tracey a card?"

"Delighted, delighted," the bank manager replied. He would gladly have paid fifty pounds for the invitation which was so freely proffered. "It is very kind of your ladyship, I am sure."

"Not at all, not at all. Good morning, Mr. Tracey."

"Good morning."

The manager himself came out of his private office and saw Lady Yeoland into her brougham. The footman banged the door and jumped up on the box. "Home, Bill," he said to the coachman. . . . It seemed that Lady Yeoland had not very much shopping to do in the city, after all!

Lunch had been over for nearly two hours. Muriel had spent the latter part of the morning in the Minster. It had been cold in the great building, but she was wrapped in furs and felt

nothing of it. She had listened to the organ harmonies with ears that heard but the inward meaning, the personal appeal of the stately fugues that rolled and pealed like thunder through the aisles and transepts. The supremest melodies of Bach formed but a complement to her thoughts. Her mind, so shaken and agitated in the immediate past by her terrible experiences, had seemed numbed—or soothed rather—to a profound peace. She was no longer drifting helplessly upon the sea of her father's ambition. Out of the night, out of the dark, out of the unknown, a knight in armour had risen to protect her. Her simple girlish mind had received a new strength and impulse.

She loved, she was beloved—the man she loved with all her heart and soul was fighting for her, for her father, for all that she had been taught to care for and revere.

Certainly, as she sat in the great cathedral and heard the thundering harmonies vibrate in that forest of stone, certainly a deep anxiety and fear formed part of her sensations. She knew that her lover was engaged in a most perilous mission. She did not undervalue the cunning, the perfect organisation which had kidnapped her by a trick

in London and forced her to witness pictured horrors. Nor had she any illusions about the sinister power of her father's enemies—those enemies who, upon the very night of her arrival at Ravenscroft, could terrify to the extremity of terror and could murder a trusted servant and friend. But she could believe utterly in one man, one force, one determination—that of her lover.

Lady Yeoland and her niece had walked some way beyond the confines of the city. Lady Yeoland talked but superficially, and Muriel herself was in no mood for conversation. They chatted to each other in an abstracted fashion, and their feet rang upon the hard road between the weathered hedges.

They left York by the northern gate and were now pushing onwards towards Ravenscroft.

Suddenly Muriel realised this, and the realisation gave her a quick pang of joy. They were only two miles from the city, but the girl's heart leapt up to think that her face was turned towards where all the hope of her life was waiting.

Suddenly her aunt said something that chilled and cut short the flow of her thought. Muriel looked round; dusk was already falling though it was not much after four o'clock. There was

something in Lady Yeoland's voice which struck a curious and a sinister note.

"Don't you think we have gone too far, auntie?" she asked suddenly, turning and seeing the lights of the city below—for they were mounting now towards the moorlands.

"Perhaps we have," came the reply, sharp, staccato, and unusual in the keen air of late afternoon. "Let's turn, then, Muriel. Possibly we have walked a little too much."

They turned, and the city faced them below. Suddenly Lady Yeoland caught Muriel to her. Her arms were strong. She held the girl and kissed her passionately.

"Auntie!" Muriel cried in wild surprise, "what do you mean, what is this?"

In answer to her question Lady Yeoland released her, and the girl went staggering back to the other side of the road. Then all that Muriel knew was that Lady Yeoland leapt at her like a panther. She felt the blow of a clenched fist upon her temple. She fell back fainting, and as she did so she heard the growing hum of an approaching motor-car.

She was not quite unconscious as a great black car stopped and people seemed to swarm from

it and carry her inside. Long after she remembered that a tiny cart came up the winding road, and that something oblong and heavy was taken from it and placed upon the seat opposite her.

The last thing she consciously knew was that the car which held her began to move with great rapidity, and that she heard a voice which brought back memories of terror.

It was one of the voices which had purred in her ear in London when she had seen the pictured story of her brother's murder.

Then Muriel fell into darkest, blackest sleep.

## CHAPTER X

CHARLIE crouched upon the floor. It was as though he were a spaniel under the whip. For a moment all feeling of manhood was struck out of him. He had come through the gravest danger. He had forced a way into the mysterious Castle of Helston with extraordinary dexterity and success. But now the sight of that awful figure in the chair cowed him as never in his life he had been cowed before.

His throat seemed as if it was packed with hot flour. His hands dripped with sweat. He heard a tiny rattling sound like distant castanets—it was the chattering of his teeth.

It was monstrous! It was hideous! It was utterly incredible! How could Sir Philip Vincent have been spirited from Ravenscroft into the Castle, and be sitting there gashed, bound, and tortured?

But the horror which struck him down, as a lightning flash strikes down some wanderer in a thunderstorm, was only momentary. In far

less time than it takes to tell of his sensations, sanity came back to him, and youth, clean-living—and above all his desperate purpose—expelled the hideous paroxysm of terror.

He rose, staggering a little, the Browning firmly clenched in his hand. And then, as he took two steps towards the thing in the chair, he gave a great sob of relief.

The electric light which fell full upon it showed that it was nothing more than an effigy of wax.

An image of wax! But wrought with such devilish and malignant skill, such triumph of sinister art, that it might well have deceived anyone who knew Sir Philip Vincent.

Still trembling, but treading quietly, Charlie went up to the waxen figure in the chair. It was clothed in a morning suit of dark grey—just as he had seen the real Sir Philip dressed only two or three hours before. Every detail of dress was absolutely faithful. The face was exactly the face of the Ambassador, as one might imagine it, when distorted by unbearable physical pain. The thing was loathsome, impossible! To look at it filled the whole soul with unnameable disgust—but it was only a waxen image after all.

What did it mean? For what purpose had some demoniac cleverness constructed it?

Even as he asked himself the question light flashed in upon Charlie's brain. He thought of the night in Park Lane when he himself had been the medium of throwing the pictures of the Raven upon the screen. Yes, that was it! The figure of the young man portrayed by the cinema had originally been a figure of wax; the girl in the bed, made to resemble Muriel Vincent, had been no more and no less.

He looked round the room. His first impression was confirmed. Never in his life had he been in such an extraordinary place; never in his life had he even dreamed of anything of the sort. The wildest nightmare of a sick man, the most fantastic dream of one who eats opium, was not so wild or bizarre as what confronted him.

In the first place he was in a huge room—hall would be the better word. The roof was an immense height from the floor. The whole of its area was covered with some dark substance which looked like ebony. Great bosses and carved arabesques hung down from it. In the light of the innumerable electric bulbs all round the walls of the room, lights which imitated wax candles in

great sconces of silver, the roof was horrible. Huge carven bats with outspread wings, vampires which gleamed and seemed to tremble, spread over the place. Here Charlie saw a great curved tentacle, with the sucker of an octopus at one end, coiling sinuously down, carved and gleaming with the hideous flesh-like scales of some deep-sea monster. As he looked up, immediately above his head he saw a dreadful little half human creature, apparently nailed to the roof, and curving downwards in a grotesque mask of pain. And there were things like gigantic fungi, bloated grey things splashed with crimson—things which seemed about to fall.

The walls of the room were hung with tapestryed curtains which obviously concealed the windows also. This must have been the very place from which the intruder had heard the monstrous music before he had found entrance to the Castle. A curtain must have been pulled over the window as the sound ceased. But the curtains were of scintillating cloth of gold. Huge Japanese dragons, embroidered in coloured silks, and with scaly mosaics of precious stones, writhed and rolled among the gold. Directly opposite to Charlie, and over the waxen image, was an

enormous dragon wrought in brilliant silks. The tail was made of thin slabs of jade, the eyes were like monstrous opals.

It took Charlie several minutes to realise this appalling and horrible magnificence. At first it was like a foul dream of hell, but as his brain began to work and his eye became accustomed he gathered other details which, while they did not in the least dispel the mystery he had come to discover, yet gave him food for thought.

He might be in the house of some powerful madman—that seemed almost certain. But he was in a human place, a place made with hands. He swore to himself that whatever happened he would not be frightened; for Muriel's sake he would not be frightened.

The first thing he noticed was that the utterly abominable caricature of Sir Philip Vincent was tightly tied with rope in an ordinary deal arm-chair painted black. The chair was merely a hasty piece of carpenter's work—just a theatrical property and nothing more. It had been designed for some special use; the probability was that it had only just been made, and that the person who was responsible for its making had been examining it.

Snatches of the conversation he had heard through the open door came back to Charlie.

The soft-voiced Japanese, who had met him and Wag Ashton in Oxford Street, had been liberated as Charlie and Wag had arranged with the landlord of their flat. Good! that was one point in this terribly engrossing game. Charlie himself, together with Wag Ashton, was supposed to have returned to London. Their ruse had not been discovered. The Japanese and the owner of the wonderful, incredible voice believed that Ravenscroft was now practically defenceless. And again, Ravenscroft was to have a respite to-night—Sir Philip and all the other people in the old moated house could sleep in peace.

It was in this way that Charlie summed up the situation, and the most satisfactory thing of all—so it seemed to him—was that Muriel was now safe from harm in York with Lady Yeoland, and that the precious regalia of Japan was guarded in the vaults of the local bank. He looked round him with greater care than before, and he saw certain things which puzzled him.

By now he had surveyed every detail of the roof. It was incredibly fantastic, and designed to inspire terror, but it was nothing more than a

sublimated edition of the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's. The dragons and serpents that glared out from the cloth of gold that covered the walls were only the most skilled and expensive instances of Japanese art. What else did the vast room tell him?

In the first place the floor was covered with woven grass matting—that was why the feet of the two people upon whom he had spied had made a rustling, slithering noise as they went away.

There, in that far corner, was the great mahogany door through which they must have gone.

Charlie began to move round the great place. The india-rubber soles of his boots made no noise whatever, and what he saw in this strange midnight prowl sent his heart beating quickly with its suggestion of the inexplicable—the unknown.

There was a table of green polished teak upon which were three vases of Satsuma enamel, so perfect, so beautiful that they represented a fortune in themselves. Upon an easel of common unpainted pitch pine was a framed colour print of Hokusai representing a marvellous green bil-low full of opalescent lights, and about to over-

whelm a tiny island in the sea, etched upon a square inch of coloured paper.

All this was simply barbaric splendour. It was a profusion of incredibly costly objects crammed into one great hall. But there were other things. . . . At the far end, stretched up against the wall to a height of ten or eleven feet, was an intricate mechanism. At first sight it looked like an organ, at a second glance it was nothing of the sort. Like some spider's web, branching out in great veins, Charlie saw something like a monstrous succession of harps. The taut wires, thick and thin, gleaming in the light, strung from square, triangular and oblong frames, were innumerable strings. And down below them, not more than a foot and a half from the ground was an odd little méchanism which seemed half like the keyboard of a typewriter, half like a doll's piano. Directly in front was an ebony music stool with a green leather seat exactly fitted for some big doll.

Ah! so this intricate system of harps had made that pealing sadness outside upon the terrace. Yes, here was the electric motor that could be switched on, and controlled the artificial fingers and plectrums which caught the melody from the

wires! But why? Why? Why? . . . That voice—that marvellous angelic voice—was that also the effort of some cunning mechanism?

With a little shudder Charlie turned his back upon the wires and machinery. He trod over the floor until he came to the waxen image in the chair. He gazed at the great door in the corner of the hall—the door through which the people whom he had heard speaking had gone.

The door had an ordinary handle. It was like the door one sees in a private suite of rooms in some great hotel.

What lay behind it?

"I have got in here," Charlie thought. "I have discovered things of which the wildest imagination does not dream. But how much further on am I with my quest? These people, whoever they are, are now asleep. The Castle must be full of servants. It must be like a feudal castle in Japan. At any moment I might arouse the place; a swarm of wasps would be round me before I knew where I was if I tried to open that door."

He turned and saw the door by which he had entered still ajar. Why should he not go out again into the carpeted corridor, and, stealing

back from where he had come, re-enter the ruined part of the Castle, and remain there waiting for events? "That is what I will do," he said to himself. "My life will not be worth a moment's purchase if I am discovered here. What the place is, what it means, I have not yet the slightest idea. At the same time I have seen it, and I can go back to Ravenscroft by the way I came and ask Sir Philip Vincent and Wag Ashton to throw some light upon my discoveries. I will go at once."

He turned to go. He trod softly over the woven matting which covered the floor. He was nearly at the door, and was casting a final glance around, when he stopped short.

The gliding, silent movement of escape gave place to rigidity. His eyes had fallen upon something which turned him into a figure as motionless as that which sat in the black painted chair of deal.

There was a great stone fireplace at the end of the room. The mantelshelf was low; upon it was a huge portrait. The portrait was framed in flat gold; around it were many lights, hidden from the eye of the observer by shell-like shades

of dark metal. An intense radiance was, therefore, thrown upon the picture.

It was the portrait of Muriel Vincent—a portrait so perfect in its technique, so utterly living and vibrating that only one of the greatest artists of the day could have painted it. Something that Muriel had told him during the motor ride to York and after the pursuit of the great black car flashed into Charlie's brain.

A year before, Pacsensky, the greatest portrait painter of the day, had requested permission to paint Miss Vincent. Sir Philip had allowed it, but had not commissioned the picture beforehand. He wanted to be sure that the famous painter would produce a portrait worthy to be added to the Ravenscroft galleries. The picture had been hung upon the line at the Academy, and on the private view day Sir Philip had attempted to buy it. He found, to his enormous surprise, that someone had been before him. When the great Polish artist was approached he simply said that Burlington House had not been opened half an hour when he received a telegram offering him two thousand pounds for the portrait, and that he had accepted the offer, which had come from a dealer, without

any hesitation. The thing had been a nine days' wonder. Muriel had told Charlie of it—now Charlie recognised where the lost picture had gone. It was here, in front of him. He looked no more towards the door leading into the corridor. He lifted up his Browning and carefully examined the automatic mechanism. Curious suspicions, dreadful thoughts were flooding and flowing in his brain.

Now he had no desire to escape to Ravenscroft.

He was standing gazing at the portrait of Muriel in an ecstasy of admiration at the artist's skill, and with an intense adoration which sent his thoughts flowing like wireless messages over the cold moorland to where his lady lay in sleep at York, when he heard a small, distinct sound.

Someone, something was approaching the door in the corner of the saloon.

Close to him was a screen of four leaves, each leaf about seven feet high. It was a lacquer screen from Japan, covered with red and black. He heard the handle of the door turn—turn very slowly. He whipped behind the screen and waited.

Then he heard the big door opening. It hardly

creaked; he felt, rather than heard, that it had opened, but he was distinctly aware of the click when it closed again.

And now, as he crouched behind the lacquer screen, desperate, furious, and unafraid of anything that the fantastic night could bring, he was aware that the owner—the unknown tenant of the room—was there.

An instinct told him. He realised that the adventure of the night was about to culminate at last.

In the very centre of the moorland, in the heart of this mysterious castle, he—Charles Penrose—was alert, waiting, ready to spring.

And on the other side of the barrier of painted wood stood that which he had come so far and risked so much to find.

An odd noise came to him. It was a little fretful whimper, like a puppy dog despoiled of its milk. Then there was a patter of feet, a chirping sound, hesitating—the noise of a thrush which tries its pipe before bursting into the full melody of dawn. Charlie waited, tense, expectant, extraordinarily alive.

He heard a swishing sound mingled with a tiny creak, as if a footstool was being pushed

over the floor. For nearly thirty heart-beats nothing else happened. Then a great moaning sob shivered out and seemed to fill the whole vast space.

Charlie took a noiseless step. His nerves were tense to breaking point, but as he walked out from behind the screen he heard again the gigantic musical bass voice which had flooded the night outside the Castle. It rose like a thousand organs. Like the wind from huge wings it beat him back. With hands behind him he caught at the edge of the table upon which the priceless vases were—and then he saw.

In front of the fireplace, seated upon a doll's chair, was that from which came the voice of an archangel in agony.

An enormous head, covered with sleek, black hair, seemed to be swaying and wobbling at a height of two feet from the ground. It was as if a monstrous bull-frog boomed its complaint to the silence.

Charlie recovered himself, picked up his pistol, strode past the tiny chair in front of the mantelpiece, and swiftly turned round.

He confronted Lord Helston!

The son of the Japanese Princess of the royal

house and of the roving Viscount of thirty years ago was one of those human beings which strike a chill to the very soul when they are viewed by ordinary eyes.

Lord Helston was less than three feet high. His frontal development was vast. The forehead bulged out over the eyes. A great intellect was confined in the abnormal skull. Below the huge protuberance were long, slanting eyes which glistened like black diamonds—purely Asiatic, and full of pain. The nose was large, aquiline, and well-formed. It was the nose of the Helston family. Below, set in a weak, receding chin, was the red-lipped mouth of some pierrot or grotesque—the mouth from which came one of the most marvellous voices in the world.

A hideous, unbelievable phenomenon! Only three feet high; a huge chest, containing lungs like leathern bellows; tiny arms which stuck out on either side of the shoulders like the feelers of a shrimp; a body which went down like a triangle, a body with hardly any legs; a huge and stunted trunk balanced uneasily upon flat projecting feet.

Charlie cried aloud in terror. Then, automati-

cally, his right arm went up and pointed the thick barrel of his pistol straight at the monster.

"Now I know!" he gasped, and giggled, giggled hysterically like a girl. "Now I know—oh!"

The creature in its low doll's chair stared at him through its glittering, slanting eyes. Then, without the slightest warning, the mouth opened and a tremendous boom of sound pressed against Charlie like an advancing wall.

"Who are you in my house, who are you?"

Charlie put up his left hand with a quick gesture. His voice, as he heard it, was throbbing and staccato.

"I am the man," he said, "who is going to put an end to your devilries. You will never get back the regalia of Japan. You think you will destroy the House of Ravenscroft; you have terrorised Sir Philip Vincent and his daughter. Now your murders and kidnappings have come home to roost."

"I can't ask you to sit down under the circumstances," came from the fantastic creature, which rose from its chair, fragile, weak, and overborne by the great nodding head.

Charlie moved a step forward.

The Thing sank quietly down once more.

"A determined young man," the rich voice murmured to itself. "I suppose you are one of those two people whom my agent enlisted by chance, and who afterwards met Sir Philip by a strange coincidence?"

Charlie nodded. "Yes. Your spies were deceived. I haven't gone back to London. I am here. Miss Vincent is out of your power. The jewels of Japan are also beyond your reach. It remains for you to account to me for your persecution of Sir Philip, to explain the murder of Anthony Vincent and of Umataro. And, lastly—the Raven."

After a satisfactory meal, visitors at the Zoo have heard the purring of the lions and tigers, those great captive cats. Charlie heard some such vibration now. He looked down with horror at the large face, the slanting eyes, and mocking mouth. The hand which held the pistol trembled a little.

"Oh you fool, you extraordinary young fool! Do you really think that in bursting into my house you can alter my purpose or defend your friends?"

Charlie was quick to see his advantage. "You

see, Lord Helston," he said in a quiet voice, "you have been able to terrorise my friends because nobody has ever known or seen you. I am well aware that you are an agent of Japan. I know, too, that you are actively working against the influence of Great Britain in the Far East."

The great face confronted him. There was a wriggle of the shrivelled body.

"I see, Mr. Penrose, you propose to——"

The monster threw back its head, and laughter like thunder crashed out into the room. The noise was appalling, the sound pressed upon the ear drums.

Charlie, sick at heart and terrified to the end of his tether, lifted his arm, pointed and aimed straight at the middle of the creature's forehead. This was not to be borne. The night was full of madness. All ordinary conventions were utterly upset. Murder ran down his arm to his pistol-end, as the angler feels the trout which takes his fly.

He pressed and pulled.

The only answer was an abortive creak of the springs. The repeating mechanism of the pistol had failed.

He flung it on the floor with an oath. Then

he stepped up to the cackling, booming creature.

"At any rate," he cried savagely, "I can choke your life out with my hands!"

"How you amuse me! Do try, do try!"

Charlie shrank back. It was impossible, and he knew that Lord Helston knew that it was impossible, to choke the life out of such a smiling monstrosity.

The young man gasped and wheeled round. Then his eyes fell upon Pacsensky's marvellous portrait of Muriel. He reeled from it, and as he did so his foot tripped against the chair in which was tied the image of Sir Philip Vincent.

He tumbled over and sprawled upon the carpet. He felt the cold wax against his face for one horrible instant. Then it seemed to him that tiny hands fumbled at his throat, that a nodding head like a child's balloon was floating over him. A sick sense of utter defeat chilled the running blood of his veins to jelly. All that he had done had been of no avail at all. He was a captive in the House of Horror, and this was the end of all. He had not fainted. His sensations were real enough, though he was only half conscious. As he struggled with his horror of the creature that lay upon him, something wet and cold

splashed down upon his nose and mouth. There was a sweet, sickly smell in his nostrils, and then, as a man sinks through deep, dark waters, everything flashed away.

Viscount Helston in the peerage of England, Baron Mountclare in the peerage of Ireland, and Prince Saumarito of the Imperial family of Japan, rose from the unconscious body of his adversary.

In one tiny hand Lord Helston held a squat bottle of thick glass which had contained chloroform. There was a little of the colourless liquid still left in the phial. He raised it to his nostrils and sniffed luxuriously. Like many another drug-taker, Lord Helston was accustomed to recruit flagging energies by an occasional sniff of the anaesthetic which in quantity destroys consciousness. He had had the bottle in the pocket of his yellow silk dressing-gown as he came into the room.

"That was a piece of good luck," he said to himself, as he raised a thin silver whistle which hung upon a chain round his neck and blew a shrill, penetrating blast.

The echo had but hardly died away when three

men came running into the room from the door to the passage.

First of all was Yoshida in a gown of padded silk; ten seconds afterwards two bare-footed attendants, small, intensely muscular Japanese. Yoshida rushed up to his master as if to support him.

"All is well," Lord Helston said in Japanese. Then he turned to the two attendants who bowed to the ground with Oriental servility. "You see," he said, pointing to Charlie Penrose.

"We see, Thou who wearest the Two Swords."

"Take that man, bind him securely, and keep him in the small yellow room. One of you must watch over him night and day. He will come to his senses presently. Answer no questions and forbid him to talk. See that he is fed. I shall have need of him."

The two little men, almost as broad as they were high, pattered to the form upon the floor. It was a curious picture. Overturned in its chair was the horrible waxen image of Sir Philip Vincent in torture. By the side of that appalling mask of wax lay the white, unconscious face of Charlie Penrose, both sharply outlined in the white glow of innumerable electric lights.

With the precision and swiftness of two perfectly co-ordinated machines, the attendants raised the heavy deal chair and set up the grinning figure as it had been before Charlie fell against it. Then, without a further word, they lifted the young man with the greatest ease and bore him quietly out of the room.

"And now, Prince, what has happened?" said Yoshida.

"To-morrow you shall hear everything. Meanwhile you can go back to your rest."

The suave Japanese made a little bow. He was bursting with curiosity. He was thrilled with apprehension at this extraordinary occurrence. How Charles Penrose was lying drugged upon the floor of Lord Helston's room he did not know. But despite his wonder and anxiety no sign of it appeared upon his face. The Oriental mask, always worn in the presence of a ruler, served him well.

"I wish you flowery sleep, Prince," he said, and glided away noiselessly.

The little figure which remained shambled to the door and turned the key in the lock. Then Lord Helston came back to his chair in front of Pacsensky's portrait of Muriel Vincent. He

sat down in his tiny padded chair and gazed long and earnestly at the wonderful presentment of the glorious and radiant girl.

Out of the long, glittering slits which were his eyes, tears began to fall and drip. One after another they coursed over the fatal face, half Asiatic, half European, wholly aristocratic and yet utterly dreadful to see. Otherwise the face showed no expression whatever, and might have been carved in yellow ivory.

Then a huge—huge is the word—sob burst out into the room like a boom of emotion. Lord Helston scrambled from his seat and went quickly to the great mechanical harp at the far end of the hall. He clambered into the seat before the keyboard. One tiny hand pulled down the electric switch of the mechanism, and then those hands, no larger than an infant's, though strong and muscular enough, began to press upon the miniature keys.

Almost immediately a great whirl of sound shivered through the room. The golden curtains seemed to sway; the whole hall to become full of mist, unreal and insubstantial as a dream. A great choir, as of lost angels, harped their agonies in piercing sadness. Then, as if a greater

angel, and even more lost than they, had come to join the concert, the thunderous, rich voice began a pæan of joy and sorrow, a volume of sound in which the creature doomed by Fate defied its Creator, and yet exulted in its own evil powers, and voiced its hideous hopes.

And the refrain of the gigantic harps, as the nimble hands floated over the keyboard, the melody of the almost supernatural voice, fused and blended into one expectant cry.

It was not a cry of patriotism that should restore the mysterious emblems of Japan to its ruler. It was not even a psalm of hate against enemies. It was the defying thunder of a great mind encased in the body of a monster; the love-song of one unable to obtain love as other men get it, but determined to realise its own desires in its own way come what might.

For nearly twenty minutes the great and lovely harmonies flooded through Helston Castle and must have been heard by late watchers upon the distant moors.

Then Lord Helston, his face a dead white, his tiny body pathetically ineffectual, managed to reach his sleeping chamber.

But as he tumbled into the sunken bed of downy cushions Lord Helston chuckled.

"In two days," he said, "she will be here and in my power!"

## CHAPTER XI

IT was a perfect winter's morning!

By nine o'clock the sun had risen over the Yorkshire moors in red splendour. There was no wind at all. The air was crisp and keen, while the frost upon the heather sparkled like jewels.

Muriel Vincent woke from a deep sleep. She stretched her arms luxuriously. Although she was not yet fully awake, she was conscious of a sense of extreme well-being and physical vigour.

She yawned lazily and opened her eyes. The first thing she saw—and saw rather than realised—were her white arms upon the counterpane of the bed. She gazed at them dreamily, and then noticed with a sudden start that she was wearing a night robe which seemed unfamiliar. Down to her elbows her arms were covered by wide sleeves of sea-green silk. She sat up in bed and felt at her throat with wondering hands.

How odd this was! She was wearing a beautifully soft but thick night-gown of green silk!

It was then that she came back from the mys-

terious kingdom of sleep into full wakefulness.

She was lying comfortably in a bed of carved wood. The sheets and blankets were of marvellous texture—the bed itself an intricate work of art. The room was flooded with morning sunshine from curved windows which looked straight to the east. The place was a pure circle. The walls were hung with some cream-coloured stuff which fell in straight lines from a lofty, vaulted ceiling of stone. To the right of the bed she saw a recessed fireplace; this also was of stone, and in it glowed an electric stove which sent out a genial but not overpowering warmth, seeming like a splash of yellow paint in the brilliant light of the sun.

Then she noticed that, despite the equable temperature of the room, one of the windows was open, and that the fresh, clear air of morning was pouring in.

For a moment or two her sensations were those of utter pleasure.

How bright the morning sun was! How softly warm the room! How simply perfect everything was! She could not remember ever having felt in better spirits. She laughed aloud in the joy of the morning and the pleasure of perfect health.

The music of her laughter had only just echoed in her own ears when she became aware of a slightly irritating sensation upon her left forearm. She pushed up the sleeve of the heavy silk night-gown, and saw that there was a tiny puncture in the skin. She could not see it very clearly, so she got out of bed and went to the window to examine it. As she crossed the room something caught her eye. It was a little glittering instrument of glass and silver in a leather case which lay upon the mantelshelf. At once she recognised what it was. It was a hypodermic syringe.

She looked at her arm. She connected the syringe, the little crimson puncture, and her abnormal sense of exhilaration. She did it in a flash of instinct rather than thought; and then, as she went to the open window and leant out from a great height to survey the moorland—she remembered!

She staggered back from the window; the colour went out of her cheeks till her face and the sable masses of her unclasped hair were ebony and ivory. Yes! Now she remembered everything! Her aunt had struck her down on the lonely road outside York; a motor had come.

She had heard a voice associated in her mind with horror; she was once again in the power of the unknown. It was obvious to her quick intelligence, stimulated as it was by the tonic drug which had been injected into her arm—no doubt in order to soothe her nerves and give her peaceful sleep—that she was in Helston Castle. The horror of it sent her reeling to the bed, upon which she fell in a paroxysm of fear. For full five minutes she crouched there like some wounded bird, but gradually vitality came flowing back, and courage returned to a girl who had never known fear for long, even during the hideous mysteries of the last few days.

She was in Helston Castle! She knew it not only by instinct, but also from the view out of her window. Every contour, each mile of these wild Yorkshire moors was perfectly familiar to her from childhood. She was in Helston Castle, only two miles away from Ravenscroft. She was a prisoner in the round tower of the modern Tudor section, a tower which she had often seen from her own bedroom in her father's house.

It was easy enough to deduce this, to brace herself against the appalling fact; but then came the thought of her aunt! Her aunt, Lady Yeo-

land, her father's sister, must have lured her out upon the lonely road, beyond the suburbs of York, with the fixed purpose of delivering her into the hands of the enemies of Ravenscroft. Strangely enough it was this fact, far more than the fact of her own imprisonment and the peril in which she knew she stood, that again unnerved her to the point of absolute collapse. What was real then? What did everything mean if one's own nearest relative was in league with one's father's implacable enemies? She wailed aloud, and without knowing it, the words she said were "Charlie! Charlie!" The name restored her like wine. Pulling the heavy quilt from the bed, she wrapped it round her and began to think swiftly. On the evening of the day when Charlie had taken her to York he had set out to discover the mystery of Helston—so much she knew from her father's letter announcing his approval of the engagement. She made a rapid calculation as well as she could. Five days ago—and what a lifetime it seemed—she had been kidnapped in London, and forced to view those dreadful, threatening pictures upon the cinema. The next day, she, her father, Charlie, Ashton, and several servants had fled from London, arriving at Ra-

venscroft the same night. During that very night the horrible apparition of the Raven, which seemed to have pursued them like some foul and ghostly bird from London to the north, had appeared to her in Ravenscroft; and later, on that same night, the faithful Japanese, Umataro, had been foully done to death. The next morning, guarded by Charlie and Ashton, and in charge of the precious crown jewels of Japan, she had fled to York. They had been pursued, their pursuers vanquished by Ashton's cleverness; then, two days afterwards, she had received her father's letter which told of Charlie's dangerous mission. On the afternoon of the same day as she had received this letter Lady Yeoland, for some dreadful reason, had betrayed her.

Where then was Charlie? Could it be that his mission had failed, and that he was also a prisoner like herself? The thought was horrible enough, but there was some comfort in it. It might well be that, even at this moment, her lover was within a stone's throw. On the other hand, had he discovered everything and returned to Ravenscroft?

And then again, how long had she been in this tower room? She found it impossible to

believe that she had been imprisoned for more than a night. Muriel was no fool, and had, despite her courage and impulsiveness, a vein of sound common sense. It was fairly obvious that she could not have been kept in a drugged state for two days and feel as she was feeling now. Very well then, surely the fact of her disappearance from York must now be known at Ravenscroft, be known to her father, to Ashton, and possibly to Charlie? If that were so, she felt sure that a rescue party was on the way. Her father, she knew, would give up all his diplomatic scheme for a friendly alliance between Japan and England, would sacrifice the regalia in order to recover his daughter. Secrecy would be abandoned. The police would be called in, and even Helston Castle with all its secrets was not above the law.

The beautiful girl's face flushed again, flushed with excitement and resolve. She clenched her hands, a fierce, angry light came into her eyes, as tall and stately she stood in the middle of the circular chamber, defying adverse Fate.

Her gaze roved round her beautiful and luxurious prison. Then she began to tremble. The clothes she had been wearing yesterday were

nowhere to be seen. She was robed in Oriental splendour. She had been drugged.

By whom, by whom?

She rushed to the window, clenched the sill, and shook with shame and anger.

"The breakfast of miss is come. I will bring the clothes of miss in a few minutes. I hope miss has slept well."

Muriel wheeled round and saw a woman, in a European skirt and a kimono, standing by her with a tray. The white hangings opposite the bed had been pushed aside, revealing a door partly open.

The tray was put down upon the bed. "I undressed you last night, miss. You were not well, and I put you to bed."

In an instant the girl's hand fell upon the shoulder of an elderly, yellow-faced woman with wisps of grisled hair. "Where am I?" she cried, with the swiftness of a startled tiger. "Be careful what you are doing! Where am I?"

The Japanese woman with the patient, inscrutable face was like a straw in the hands of the strong and vigorous English girl. She did not attempt any resistance, but said monoto-

nously, "I bring breakfast for miss. I shall bring miss her clothes very soon."

It was the strangest of situations. In the middle of the circular room, hung with white and filled with sunlight, a girl in a padded gown of green silk, with black hair falling almost to her knees, shook a decrepit Asiatic as a terrier shakes a rat.

"Where am I? Where am I? You had better tell me, quick."

"I have brought the breakfast of miss; I——"

Muriel flung the woman from her, and darted to the door.

Then she recoiled. Standing at the head of a narrow stairway was a Japanese. He wore gold pince-nez. His little moustache was waxed at each end. His suit of Harris tweed was irreproachable.

"You had better go back, Miss Vincent," he said. "Breakfast awaits you. The old lady will do anything you wish, and we of this house are sorry that there was no time to get you a more suitable maid."

Muriel knew that voice. It was that of one of her captors in London, her captor the night

before in York. She went back into the bedroom.

The elderly Japanese woman made a low bow, and slipped through the door, which immediately closed behind her with an ominous click.

There was no table in the room, so Muriel made her breakfast sitting upon the bed. She realised that whatever might be about to happen to her, she must recruit all her energies and forces. Never had she drunk such tea. The toast under its silver cover was delightfully crisp and hot. There was a golden omelette, and in a bowl of egg-shell china a pile of crimson strawberries.

"Strawberries in December," Muriel said aloud. "Well, they don't mean to starve me anyhow. And soon, soon my father and Charlie will be here. It must be so!"

She made an excellent breakfast, and when the door opened again and the fantastic lady's maid entered with her clothes, Muriel was as cool and collected as if she were dressing in Park Lane with Jane Gregory to help her. A toilet set had been brought upon a silver tray. The combs were of tortoise shell and gold. The brushes of old ivory, carved so perfectly that

they were a joy to look at. She heard the soft sound of various attendants upon the stair outside the door. The old woman, who seemed of great strength, carried in a bath of bright metal, and tall ewers of warm and scented water.

When the door finally closed, Muriel surveyed toilet utensils such as a princess might have envied. She took it all quite calmly; bathed, dressed, and towered her hair. When her toilet was complete she sat down and simply wondered.

"What does it all mean?" she asked herself, and found no answer. "When shall I be released?" and there was no answer even to that. But now she felt fitted to cope with any situation, and as the sun rose higher and its golden beams danced and played all over the white hung room, she fell into a dream and reverie of the man she loved.

Upon the end rail of the carved bed was the fur coat that she had been wearing the afternoon before. She was gazing at it idly, noticing how the sunlight played upon the rich sable, when she saw something white projecting from one of the side pockets. At first she thought that it might be a handkerchief, and then, moved by

curiosity, she leant over the bed and felt in the pocket.

She withdrew a square envelope. It was a pattern she knew well. It was the thick, creamy paper used at the Commander-in-Chief's house in York.

Her heart gave one great throb, and she tore the envelope open.

Upon the paper embossed with the dark red crest of the Yeolands, she read these words:

“MURIEL,—I had to do it. When you read this you may be sure that I am suffering the tortures of the damned. But I had to do it. A power greater than you can possibly conceive has forced me. But remember that no harm will come to you—indeed I am sure no harm can come to you. Try and think kindly of a woman for whom Fate has been too strong. I hardly dare sign myself, your aunt                    MARIA.”

. . . . .  
The morning was as fresh, as clean, as cold at Ravenscroft as at Helston, when Wag Ashton crossed the great quadrangle to the garage. He entered the principal shed where

the second chauffeur, an amateur of boxing, was waiting for him.

"Morning, Mr. Ashton," the man said with great politeness, "are you ready, sir?"

Wag's face was pale and lined. His eyes showed want of sleep, but he seemed as alert and springy as ever. "Right you are, Nichols," he said, "quarter of an hour will do me all the good in the world."

"You are not looking well, Mr. Ashton," the chauffeur said as he pulled on a pair of boxing gloves.

"I am worried," Wag remarked. "Now then, you call time when you like."

The two men set to work. The chauffeur was a thick-set fellow of thirty, with a long reach, and in the pink of condition. He was a skilful boxer, but it was beautiful to see him with the trained professional. Little Wag simply walked round him. His foot work was wonderful. Time after time he avoided a heavy blow by the slightest movement of his feet, hardly deigning to use his head at all. And when he changed his tactics and used his head, Nichols was as unable to get in either right or left as before. His punches merely glanced off Wag's fore-

arm and grazed his ear, while the little man touched his adversary where and when he liked. The chauffeur called time every two minutes or so, and then they went at it again until they had sparred for quarter of an hour. At the end of the bout Nichols thanked Wag profusely. "Since you have been here, Mr. Ashton," he said, "the lessons I have received are invaluable. I never knew before that I knew so little."

"Not a bit of it, Nichols, you would make a first-class boxer. All you want is regular practice, not with your equals, but with someone who could show you something. Well, I must be off and have my bath. I have got to see Sir Philip in twenty minutes."

With the tired look gone from his face, but still with the same haunting anxiety in his eyes, Wag ran across the quadrangle and went to his room. In twenty minutes he had bathed, shaved, and was fully dressed; then he went down the two corridors which separated his room from the library which Sir Philip was using, knocked at the door and entered.

The baronet was walking up and down the room. A table was laid for breakfast.

"Sit down, Ashton," he said, "let's begin. You

are quite right in what you have been telling me. If one is to keep up one's energies one must eat."

Brice, the butler, brought in some hot water dishes and left the room. Sir Philip and his guest began their meal.

For full five minutes they ate in silence. The boxer took some kidneys, and ate with excellent appetite. Sir Philip only toyed with devilled chicken leg. At last he put down his knife and fork.

"Ashton, my dear fellow," he said, "I can't bear the suspense any longer. What has happened?"

Wag's face flushed with sympathy. "Sir Philip," he answered, "you speak of poor dear Charlie in a way that makes me proud to hear you."

"And how can I help it?" was the reply. "I have only known Penrose a few days, but those days have been among the most momentous in my life. I have given my conditional consent to his marriage with my daughter. I look on him as my son; I look on you as my most faithful friend."

Little Wag was greatly affected, but he did

not show it. "Rum thing life, Sir Philip, when you come to think of it," he remarked. "A week ago none of us knew anything about each other, and here am I having breakfast with a baronet and an ex-Ambassador."

The quick man of the world was not deceived. "But what do you think, Ashton?" he asked. "For God's sake let's form some plan or other. How do we stand? What has happened to that gallant young fellow? Two whole days have passed. We have not heard a word. For all we know, Penrose may have been foully murdered and be lying under six feet of peat upon the moor."

Wag shook his head, though he shivered a little as he did so. "What a nasty, powerful imagination you have, Sir Philip," he remarked. "Don't think of such things, don't speak of them. If I thought what you said were true——" he hastily lifted a cup to his lips and gulped down some scalding coffee.

"All last night," he said at length, "I was watching Helston, not a hundred yards away from the Castle. I learnt nothing, certainly, but somehow—if feelings have got anything to do with it—I came home before dawn sure that

Charlie was alive and kicking. What has happened to him I don't know, none of us know; but, mark my words, he will have the best of Helston yet. At any rate, Sir Philip, we have had no more visits from the Raven—and that seems significant. Ravenscroft has been left absolutely undisturbed since Charlie went. Miss Muriel and you know what are perfectly safe at York."

"That is indeed the great thing," Sir Philip returned. "It may be also that, as you say, Charlie Penrose is safe. I hope and pray he is. He is a man of careful judgment and absolutely fearless. But about these apparitions, Ashton. As you know, we have had the panelling in my daughter's room and in the smaller library torn down. It revealed nothing whatever but the stone walls. How could that Thing, whatever it was, have found entrance to the house? Even if Dent had let the creature in, it would have been impossible for him to have found his way to this part of the house without detection, and Dent seems to have confessed everything he knows."

"Quite so, Sir Philip. I have seen Dent every day in the plate pantry. I have got his very

heart out of him, of that I am sure. He has only been a very petty traitor, after all, and he seems thoroughly repentant. He will go off to Canada next week, blessing you for all you did for him in the past, and for his new start in life. But about the Raven. I have got an idea. I have been figuring it out in my own mind, and I think I have got a possible clue. It is like this, Sir Philip——”

Wag stopped short as Brice entered the room with a telegram upon a salver.

Sir Philip tore it open.

“Come at once without instant’s delay,” the wire read. “Matter of extreme importance concerning M. Tom.”

Sir Philip looked up. “Brice,” he said, “tell Rainer to have the Mercedes ready within five minutes to go to York at top speed.”

Wag was already standing up at the table when Sir Philip passed him the telegram. “It is from my brother-in-law, General Yeoland,” he said.

Wag read the telegram. “I’ll be in the quadrangle in five minutes,” he said. And as

he hurried away to his room he cursed the ambiguity of the wire. Why on earth could not Sir Thomas have explained more freely?

If ever the elderly and skilled head chauffeur had driven fast in his life he did so now. Sir Philip's orders were precise. Each and every risk was to be taken. York was to be reached in record time—and record time it was when the big car stopped in front of Sir Thomas's house, after a journey like a bullet from a gun.

"I'll wait here, Sir Philip," Wag whispered as the butler ushered them into the hall.

"No, no, come in with me," the baronet answered, taking his arm. Together the two entered the dining-room.

Sir Thomas, in a tweed suit, was standing with his back to the fire; his face wore an air of grave concern. In an armchair not far away Lady Yeoland was lying back. Her face was like death, and there were traces of tears upon it. Standing upon the other side of the table was an inspector of police.

"Here I am, Thomas," Sir Philip rapped out, "what is the matter? Where is Muriel?"

His eyes roved round the room with a dreadful anxiety in them. The General's face became

purple. "Philip," he said in a broken voice, "that's just what—what—damn it, that is just what we don't know. My dear fellow, I am almost out of my mind."

Sir Philip quietly sat down, motioning to Wag to do the same. "This is my friend, Mr. Ashton," he said in a level voice, "who is entirely in my confidence. Now then, Tom, explain yourself."

"It is like this, Philip," the General began, his voice trembling with genuine emotion, "yesterday Muriel and Maria went out for a walk in the late afternoon. During the whole of the day I was out on manœuvres. I didn't get back till nearly one in the morning. I had expected to be back by dinner-time, but we received orders by field wireless to continue the operations till midnight. When I got back I found Maria in a state of the wildest agitation. Now, Maria, tell your brother the rest."

Lady Yeoland sat up a little in her chair. "Oh, Philip," she said in a thin and quavering voice, so unlike her usual decision of speech that her brother started violently, "oh, Philip, Muriel and I went out for a walk, as Tom says. I got rather tired, but Muriel wanted to go on.

We had got to the outskirts of the city, and so we arranged that I should take a tram back to the High Street, and that Muriel should return in time for dinner at eight. I came back and waited for her. I waited till nine and she never came. Tom was away and I didn't know what to do."

"I think I told you, Maria," Sir Philip cut in, and his voice was like ice, "that the reason I sent Muriel to you was that she should be very specially guarded and looked after?"

The police inspector moved suddenly. His face became alive with interest, and Sir Philip saw it. "Tell us the rest, Maria," he went on quietly, "and then I will ask the inspector his view."

The inspector's right hand went mechanically to his forehead in a salute.

"Well, then," Lady Yeoland continued, "I sent the servants out on the road where we had gone, but they came back at midnight without any news at all."

"You fool, Maria," Sir Philip snapped out, "and I always thought that you were a peculiarly capable woman. Do you mean to tell me that you waited till midnight before communicating

with the police—you who have been in every capital in Europe, who have been in Japan with me?"

Lady Yeoland waved her strong white hands. "Oh, Philip," she said, "I was doubtless very foolish, I——"

"Just what I told Maria myself," Sir Thomas broke in. "She might have sent the butler over to the barracks and had a couple of hundred men scouring the roads for Muriel. But she seems to have lost her head, Philip, and that is all I can say. She has not been at all well during the last week. Everyone has noticed it. Think as kindly of her as you can. I am to blame, you asked me to look after Muriel and, by gad, I don't seem to have done it!"

The celebrated soldier pulled savagely at his moustache, and there were tears in his eyes.

"Never mind, never mind," Sir Philip answered quickly. "I am sorry I spoke harshly to you, Maria. The point is what has been done?"

He turned inquiringly to the inspector of police.

The man saluted again. "Sir Philip, he said with great deference, "my men have searched and are searching everywhere. I am sorry to

say that we have not a single clue, though we have several theories."

"Theories be damned, Inspector," Sir Thomas broke out. "The fact is that you have not discovered anything." He threw out his arm and looked at his brother-in-law. "Philip, my dear old fellow," he said, "it is heart-breaking. I'd give everything I have in the world to know where the poor dear girl is."

For several seconds there was absolute silence in the room. Sir Philip put his hand to his head and groaned. As if the burden was too much to bear he turned away from all of them. As he did so he saw something which startled him, even in the midst of his mental agony. Wag Ashton was sitting upon a chair against the wall by the door. Wag Ashton was leaning forward. His face seemed to be sharpened like the face of a ferret. His eyes were fixed in a steady glare upon the sobbing woman in the arm-chair. He was staring at Lady Yeoland as if she fascinated him.

There was a knock at the door of the dining-room.

It opened, the Yeolands' butler came in.

"Beg your pardon for disturbing you, Sir

Thomas," the man said, "which was why I knocked, but Mr. Tracey, the manager of the Capital and Yorkshire Bank, is here."

"Tell him to go to the devil," the General exploded. "We are very importantly engaged."

"Excuse me, Sir Thomas," the butler replied, "but I don't think this is an ordinary visit. Mr. Tracey seems rather agitated. He saw Sir Philip's motor going through the city and found that Sir Philip was here. He wishes to speak immediately to Sir Philip. I thought, Sir Thomas, that it might have something to do with Miss Muriel, as Mr. Tracey is very much upset."

Sir Philip jumped up like a shot. "Bring him in, bring him in," he cried.

And in a few seconds Mr. Tracey came into the room. He looked round, saw the group of people, and hesitated.

"Good morning, Mr. Tracey," the General said curtly, "would you like to see Sir Philip alone?"

"No, no, Tom, anything that Mr. Tracey has to say can be said to all of us, I am sure," Vincent interposed.

"Perhaps you would wish me to retire, gentlemen"—this from the inspector of police.

"Not at all, not at all," said Sir Thomas, "you had better hear anything that may throw light upon the mystery."

"A mystery it is indeed," said Mr. Tracey, "and I fear a somewhat serious one."

"Somewhat serious!" the General burst out. "Good gracious, Tracey, you must be out of your senses! It is dreadful, it is dreadful!"

The bank manager looked bewildered. "I didn't know," he faltered. "Of course I knew that the box entrusted to our vaults was of great value——"

"Box!" the General cried, "it's the disappearance of Miss Muriel Vincent we are talking about. Confound it, I thought you had come to give us some light upon that!"

"Miss Vincent? I don't know what you mean, Sir Thomas."

Then the inspector of police spoke.

"Perhaps this is a little more in my line, gentlemen," he said. "What has happened, Mr. Tracey?"

The bank manager seemed relieved at having some definite question put to him. "Sir Philip

Vincent deposited a brass-bound box with me three days ago. Yesterday I received a letter authorising its removal, and stating that his Japanese servant would call for it. The Japanese duly did so and signed a receipt. I was going through various papers this morning before giving them to my clerk to docket, and I came across this receipt. The signature, which I distinctly remember was that of Sir Philip's confidential servant, Umataro, the signature which I had seen with my own eyes before I delivered the box into his charge, was blank."

"What do you mean, Mr. Tracey?"

"I mean that on the receipt form that I now hold there is no signature at all. The Japanese came into my private room. He produced a fountain pen from his pocket. He signed the receipt in my presence. Now there is no name whatever upon it. No doubt it is all right, but I have come, Sir Philip, to receive your assurance that you are in possession of your property."

"Mr. Tracey," Vincent answered—each word was clear and emphatic to everyone in the room—"I never wrote to you authorising you to deliver the box to anyone. I never sent my servant,

Umataro, to reclaim it. Moreover, a special guard was placed upon the bank owing to the value of the contents of that box."

"Yes it was," Sir Thomas Yeoland broke in. "I ordered a sentry myself."

"And at your request I detailed a special constable, Sir Thomas," said the inspector.

The bank manager seemed to have grown ten years older. "I can't understand it," he said, and as he did so he looked steadily at Lady Yeoland. His face was ashen grey. They all noticed that his hands were trembling.

"Do you mean to tell me, Mr. Tracey," Sir Philip Vincent said in a hard, cold voice, "that my foreign servant, Umataro, came into your room and signed that receipt?"

"I would swear it, Sir Philip."

There was a sudden interruption from a person who had hitherto been quite quiet.

"May I speak, Sir Philip?" Wag Ashton asked.

"My dear Ashton, I had quite forgotten that you were here. Of course you may, of course you may." There was an eagerness in Sir Philip's voice.

"You knew Sir Philip's Japanese servant before, Mr. Tracey?" Wag asked.

The manager looked at the little pugilist doubtfully. "Yes," he said, after a moment's pause, "whenever Sir Philip was at Ravenscroft he would come into the bank to cash cheques and so forth."

"But you didn't know him personally?"

"Excuse me, I did. On two occasions he was in my private room, and I remember what excellent English he spoke."

"But one Japanese is very like another, Mr. Tracey, you might have been mistaken?"

"I do not know who you are, sir," the respected manager replied, "but I had the best of reasons, as Sir Philip knows, for trusting his messenger."

"Ah, now we are getting at it," Sir Philip replied; "what were your best of reasons?"

"Why, of course, Lady Yeoland bringing your letter to me, Sir Philip," Tracey answered in amazement.

"Lady Yeoland?" Sir Philip returned, and there was a general stir and movement in the room. "What on earth do you mean?" He turned and looked inquiringly at his sister. "Is

the man mad, Maria? I never wrote you any letter, did I?"

Lady Yeoland rose from her chair and laughed. "Oh," she said, "I can quite see how that mistake has arisen in Mr. Tracey's mind. I have got a letter—it is in the breakfast-room—which will explain everything."

The breakfast-room opened out of the dining-room, and to get to it Lady Yeoland had to pass before the fireplace. As she did so she put both her hands upon her husband's shoulders and kissed him, laughing still. "You will remember this, Tom, won't you?" she said, as she passed from their sight.

They all looked at each other. Lady Yeoland's manner had been very strange. A cold doubt seemed to be present in the dining-room.

The inspector of police shifted his feet. Wag Ashton came up to Sir Philip and began to whisper in his ear. The General stared at the door leading into the breakfast-room. He breathed heavily as he did so.

Then came the loud, whip-like crack of the pistol, and the thud of some heavy body falling.

They rushed into the breakfast-room.

The shutters had been opened, but the blinds

had not yet been drawn. The yellow light of winter midday filtered in strangely.

Upon the floor lay Lady Yeoland, a splendid woman, just over middle age, massive, majestic in death.



## CHAPTER XII

HE had endured it for nearly eighty hours.

There was no change. No one had come to rescue him. He tasted the horrors of prison for the first time, and they were horrible indeed. They were more horrible because he was sentenced by no social law, he was the captive of a madman, a monster without any restraining influence but that of his own will and imperious desire. Why had no one come to rescue him? Was he to be sacrificed to Sir Philip Vincent's morbid desire to avoid publicity and the calling in of the regular police? What had happened to Wag Ashton—was he also tamely allowing his dearest friend to languish forgotten in Helston Castle?

It was incredible, but facts spoke for themselves. Meanwhile hope and life were slowly ebbing away, and Charlie Penrose was sure that some dreadful fate must be hourly growing nearer and nearer.

He had not been ill-treated. When, with ach-

ing head and fevered body, he woke from his drugged sleep, he found himself in a windowless room, in the roof of which an electric fan whirred softly. He had expected some form of fantastic, unnatural torture. Nothing of the kind had happened to him. Round his left ankle was a locked circle of steel. There was a ring in it, and from the ring a thin chain went to a hasp fixed in the wall. The chain was no thicker than a heavy watch-chain, but it was forged by workmen who had never heard the name of Birmingham. Charlie had considerable range of movement. He could sit down in a leather-padded armchair. He could lie upon a couch. Upon a table within his reach were such luxuries as cigarettes and the current number of *Punch*. His meals were served regularly, and were of excellent quality—even wine was provided. But always, night and day, a silent Japanese, changed at intervals, sat watching him, waking or sleeping. In front of the Japanese was a little lacquer table upon which were a couple of revolvers. The Japanese guard would never speak. At first Charlie had bombarded him with questions, but he had remained as silent, as irresponsible as a yellow china doll. If, however, he made a re-

quest for anything, the guard would press the button of an electric bell, another noiseless attendant would appear, there would be a whispered moment of talk, and within ten minutes Charlie generally found that what he asked for was brought to him.

And yet it was ghastly, appallingly ghastly. He thought of some murderer in an English prison after sentence—a poor wretch who is never left alone for a single instant until the morning when the door opens at eight o'clock, and a little brisk man enters with the Governor, carrying leather straps in his hands.

At any moment the door of this quiet room might open, and something far more awful than the hangman enter to lead him to a death far less merciful than the rope and the drop.

Why did nobody come?

He knew the time, and he calculated the duration of his imprisonment. His watch had been left him, and his silent guardian made no objection to his winding it. It was at nine o'clock on Thursday night, as he calculated, when his silent guardian at the far end of the room suddenly got up and left it.

As a rule one Japanese had not been gone for

a second before another entered. On this occasion Charlie was left alone for nearly a quarter of an hour.

His heart began to beat quickly. There was a decanter of wine upon the table. He poured a little into a glass and drank. "It is coming now," he thought. "It is all over with me. This is the appointed hour." He sank upon his couch, bent his head, and prayed that he might play his part like a man. He thought of Muriel, and one great sob burst from him. Then he forgot all worldly things.

A slight noise reached his ears. He lifted his head quickly.

In the middle of the room, having arrived there by some means which certainly did not include the opening of the door, stood something the prisoner knew well. It was the Raven! It was the figure Charlie himself had projected upon the screen upon the very night when he met the girl he loved. It was the haunting horror of Ravenscroft at which Ashton had shot. It was the Mystery itself!

Charlie's room was lit by a single electric pendant in the centre of the ceiling. As he saw the filthy Thing, not very distinctly, the wings

opened and flapped. The Thing leapt from the floor, and a croaking noise came from it, hideous and obscene.

Charlie fell back against the wall. Disgust caught him by the throat; he struggled with a physical nausea. But it did not last for more than a second. Charlie was not done yet. He forced himself to attention. He saw, hopping about in the middle of the room, a grotesque figure, less than three feet high, with wings that flapped mechanically and a hideous pantomime mask upon its head. The whole thing was very well carried out. The costume was elaborate, the mask perfection, but it flashed at once into Charlie's mind who and what the apparition was, and had been.

He laughed aloud.

"You dirty little madman," he said, "what a fool I was not to have thought of it before, since you have kept me here! It is you, abominable little monster that you are, who has been frightening women and trading upon an old family legend."

It was as he expected. The mask was thrown aside and rolled harmlessly towards the door.

Lord Helston divested himself of the feathered skin, and appeared in ordinary evening dress.

Charlie laughed the more. He was absolutely reckless, his voice was cruel, and the scorn in it was like a whip.

"So you dress yourself as an ordinary human being, do you?" he said. "You are wearing a little tiny evening coat, a little white tie—just as if you were a man."

Then he stopped suddenly. Over the huge face and bulging forehead came a spasm of anguish so unnatural, so dreadful, that even the captive recoiled. It was not hatred nor malignancy. It was a glimpse of a maddened soul, tied and bound in an awful caricature of a body—a glimpse of a great soul in hell.

But it was an evil soul that peered from those slanting, Asiatic eyes.

Lord Helston looked round the room. There was nothing upon which he could conveniently sit. He ran to the wall and pressed the electric bell-push—he could only reach it by standing on his toes. Immediately attendants entered. He said a rapid word, and a little chair was brought him. He sat down in it and faced his captive.

"Well, Mr. Penrose," he began, in an almost

pleasant voice, made more pleasant by its quiet suavity and music, "now you know all about the 'Raven.' I am the Raven, of course. That useful legend of the Vincent family suggested the idea to me. When my agent, Mr. Yoshida, engaged your services to show certain films in my Park Lane house, you saw and Miss Vincent saw—purely imaginary events."

"Of course, Lord Helston," Charlie said as composedly as if he were talking to an after-dinner friend, "as a cinema operator, I knew the pictures were faked."

"I am beginning to like you, Mr. Penrose," was the reply. "Your intelligence is far from usual. As you gathered three days ago, when you unfortunately tripped over the wax figure of Philip Vincent, I amuse myself with modelling in wax. I modelled the figure of that unfortunate young fellow, Anthony Vincent. From photographs I also made a wax figure of Sir Philip's daughter. The Vincents had not been at Ravenscroft for six months. With the means at my command it was quite easy to introduce these figures into the house, enact the scenes you witnessed, and have a film made of them by my own cinema operator—a Japanese who, unfortu-

nately, died of pneumonia three months ago. If the fellow had not died, I should never have required your services, and you would not be in the somewhat unpleasant position that you are."

"Very ingenious, Lord Helston," Charlie answered—he was desperate now, and was determined to play out this hideous comedy to the end. "But I should like to ask you how you managed to make a personal manifestation of the Raven last Sunday night?"

"It was simple enough," the dwarf answered, drawing a cigarette case from his pocket and beginning to smoke. "You have recently made some remarks about my unfortunate physical appearance—an appearance for which I am not responsible. But it has advantages. I am, I believe, much smaller than the usual run of English peers. I am told that in Helston Castle by my faithful Japanese, which is the reason why I remain at Helston and in Park Lane without inviting society and giving parties. Nevertheless, I have considerable physical strength. There is a system of ventilation in Ravenscroft House which has existed for ages, but which has never been discovered by the stupid Vincents, either in the past or now. A culvert curves under the

moat. It begins upon the moor, twenty yards away from the moat-edge. A heavy stone conceals it, and heather has grown over it. This great pipe goes under the water, rises up into the house, and is provided with an iron ladder. For what purpose it was originally designed I don't know. It is sufficient to say that when one has climbed the ladder it leads to a false loft between the second and third floors of the house, and that in several rooms a panel in the ceiling drops down like a trap door. What more easy for me than to arrange a rope, to press the spring of the falling panel, to descend the rope, and to appear wherever I wish in that particular part of the house? I am somewhat of an electrician. It was easy enough to nip the wires, and plunge the rooms in darkness. The particular advantage of being all head and no body is that I can go up a rope hand over hand as quickly as a lizard up a wall. You will see that my disappearances were quite simple. Your acute imagination will supply the details."

"Of course I had not seen you, Lord Helston," Charlie said. "Nobody has ever seen you. You must know how the Press has been agitating itself for a long time about your personality?"

"I do know."

"If I had seen you, as I recently had the pleasure, I should have understood the Raven in a moment. Of course, Lord Helston, there can be only one reason for your telling me this so frankly?"

The great head nodded. The eyes glittered.

"You are going to have me killed?"

"Well, you can hardly expect anything else, can you?"

"I suppose not. Have you arranged any particularly ingenious form of torture?"

The dwarf shook his head. "Oh, no," he answered absently. "You have got to serve my purpose to-night in a way which will give you no physical pain, and after that—well, just as you like. I will give you a revolver, or Yoshida shall chloroform you."

"And that purpose?" Charlie asked.

The room was filled with booming, thunderous sounds.

The Thing in the chair began to gyrate, to spin round with little outstretched arms, as a dervish spins in Cairo or Kairrouan.

The noise stunned the prisoner for a time. The fantastic misery of his captivity became a

sick dream in which he heard only this great unending droning.

Within Charlie's brain the heavy music waxed and waned. It pulsed through his whole body with indescribable pain. But, as he braced himself to endure this last torture, he heard the music resolving into a phrase—a name!

“Muriel! Muriel! Muriel!”

The noise stopped. It was as if a thick door had been shut. The spinning dwarf sank exhausted into his chair. His face was livid, his eyes glowed like black diamonds.

Charlie had rushed to the end of his chain with clenched hands. He fell full on his face. He scrambled up with an instinctive groan of pain. His ankle was wrenched almost out of its sockets.

“What do you mean, you abortion?” he cried. “What do you mean by mentioning that name?”

He stood there, chained and impotent, shaking with anger.

For a long time, several minutes perhaps, there was no answer. The great head—for it was little more—was motionless, but the beady eyes narrowed into slits of dark light and played over the prisoner with their intense and glittering scrutiny.

At last Lord Helston spoke. His voice had lost the accents of a cultured Englishman. It had become imperious. It had taken on quite another note—though it was beautiful still. It was the Prince of the Imperial House of Japan that spoke now.

“Dog, what do you mean?”

“I mean this, that Muriel Vincent is my promised bride. I mean that her father has given his consent. I mean that she loves me as deeply as I love her.”

With a shriek of rage so loud and piercing that it seemed to shake the room to its foundations, the dwarf hurled himself at Charlie.

The young man waited the onslaught with savage joy, he stretched out his strong hands to catch the great head as he would have caught a football at Harrow. His hands closed upon it, they slipped, Lord Helston writhed away upon the carpet.

And now the infuriated prisoner saw a new phase of the half-human being that held him captive. Within a minute Lord Helston was sitting in his chair and chuckling with hideous merriment. It seemed as if he had quite forgotten everything that had happened.

"Oh, this is a new development," he laughed. "This is more and more interesting. I begin to live at last! Mr. Charles Penrose, some time during to-morrow night you will be set free."

Charlie started. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"What I say. To-morrow you will be set free to go your way as you will. And to-night, Charles Penrose, you will hear Muriel Vincent accept me for her husband, and in your presence."

Charlie gave a groan of anger like that of a caged beast. The light in the room went out as he did so, and when, after an interval of a minute it softly glowed again, he saw one of his silent watchers sitting in the usual seat against the wall, as if nothing whatever had occurred.

. . . . .  
They had brought Muriel down from the tower-room—two little women and a guard of three Japanese dressed in a sort of Asiatic livery.

She was faint and hopeless. All day long she had been waiting. They had fed her, they had treated her with courteous consideration, but no one had come.

No one had come! She felt the net closing round her. Father, ordinary life, even Charlie

seemed to be receding into an immense distance. She was like the princess in some hideous fairy-tale, and as she descended the winding tower steps with her attendants actual life, real things seemed to have fled from her for ever and a day.

And still it seemed a dream as she traversed carpeted corridors, and was at length shown assiduously into an enormous room. She could distinguish but very little. All the lights of the place came from some distance, but it seemed to her that the high roof above was strangely populated, and that the walls glimmered faintly as if they were of gold. She was led to a couch, a low eastern divan heaped with cushions. Obedient to the gesture of the old woman who had waited on her during her captivity, but hardly realising what she did, she sank down upon the cushions. She felt deft, swift fingers about her ankles. There were two tiny clicks, and as she raised herself in sudden alarm she saw that her feet were confined by circles of gleaming gold, and that the aged women from Japan were fastening them to the legs of the couch by chains of the same precious metal.

Muriel was not inconvenienced in any way. While she reposed upon the couch she could move

as she wished, but she could not leave it. Her attendant of the tower-chamber came and whispered in her ear, "It is the orders of the Prince, miss, but you will come to no harm."

The girl sank back upon her cushions. What did it matter? What did anything matter? She was living in a fantastic dream, and life, hope, and all that made life sweet were slowly ebbing away.

Attendants moved through the dim light like gigantic moths. They seemed to be moving tall dark things, and in a moment Muriel realised that the couch on which she lay chained in gold was surrounded by screens of dark lacquer.

She lay, as it were, in a little room with only one wall wanting. In front of her she saw heavy curtains, like the curtains of a stage. Then there was silence.

She moaned aloud. An echo seemed to catch her complaint, to play with it, enlarge upon it, and make it musical.

She started. Faint and sweet she heard the thrilling chords of a harp. The music rose and swelled into a wonderful melody of longing, of passionate desire. She was confined in a screened alcove, but she heard the august orchestra filling

the great place in which she was. It was indescribably lovely; and the huge harmonies wrapped her round with soothing sound.

Where was she? What did it all mean? But what did it matter to a tired mind when it was so lovely? The angels of heaven catching at their golden strings could make no fairer music.

The harps ceased. Then there came a low rumbling sound like the pedal stop of some great organ. The whole air vibrated with it. It changed and swung and the girl became conscious of a Voice. It was a voice more than human. It seemed, indeed, the voice of an angel. It sang a high, piercing anthem of love, not of earthly love, but of the union of two great minds and souls. As she heard it she was thrilled to the very depths. Tears came into her eyes and rolled unchecked down her cheeks. She thought of her lover, she thought of Charlie, and she felt as if he and she were together in eternal joy.

The singing Voice stopped. Muriel lay in an ecstasy of love and longing. Then the invisible Voice began to speak.

“Muriel! Muriel! I love you! I have seen you when you did not know of it. I have worshipped your picture for many months. You and

you only are the maid for me. Answer me, Muriel!"

And now the girl's face was all aflame, her eyes lit with fear and wonder. "Who are you?" she cried in her rich, ringing soprano. "Am I alive? What is this voice that calls me?"

"The voice of one who loves you and whom you will love."

Again there was a sudden chord of harp that swept through the air like angels' wings.

Muriel gripped the side of the couch on which she lay. She became immensely alert and aware. She remembered everything. The glamour of the invisible singer rolled up like a curtain in her mind. She only knew that she was a prisoner in a dreadful house.

"Love," she answered, "I love one man only, and your voice is not his."

"I knew you would say that," the haunting tones replied, "but nevertheless you will love me and be mine."

The girl laughed. Fascination of the musical Voice had passed away. "I am an English girl," she said, "whoever you are you are seeking to terrify me, but you will not do it. I have my father and friends."

"Friends!" the Voice replied. "Did not your aunt, Lady Yeoland, strike you down and deliver you into my hands?"

There was a momentary silence, and then Muriel gave a sob of terror.

"She had to do it, she had to do it," the girl cried, "she put a note in my coat, oh, don't torture me, whoever and whatever you are. Show yourself!"

"The time for that has not yet come. It is true that poor Lady Yeoland was forced to do what she did."

"Forced?" Muriel shouted, anger taking the place of fear and her voice ringing through the vast room, "Forced?"

"Yes," the sad and beautiful Voice answered. "She was in Japan with your father years ago when my father also was out there. She married a young naval officer unknown to any of your family. He was struck down by sunstroke and became insane. For many, many years—he is an old man now—he has been kept in an asylum. Your aunt married again, confident that no one at all would know of the poor idiot in a far eastern asylum for the mad. But I knew. At a word from me, her honour, her position would flash

away like nothing. She had to bring you to me, my love, my darling!"

"Scoundrel! Kidnapper! Do you think you can frighten me? In a few hours my father and those who are with him, the police also, will throng into this hideous place, and you, whoever you are, will suffer the penalty for what you have done."

The echoing, musical answer was so charged with sadness and yet so full of power that the shackled girl sat up upon her couch and gazed wildly round the screens that confined her vision.

"Your father and your lover are in my power. They are in this castle. It depends upon you whether they die to-night or not."

A high, courageous and ringing laughter drowned the last words of the Voice. "You think you can frighten me to death! You can't!"

There was no answer in words, but slowly, with an inevitable movement, the curtains in front of the girl looped themselves up. Lights flashed into brilliance. She gazed for a moment with horror-stricken eyes, shrieked loudly, and fell into a deep swoon.

How long she was unconscious, neither then, nor at any other time, did she know. She came to

herself while the old Japanese woman was sponging her face with aromatic vinegar. She sighed, and as she did so her attendants were gone. Once again the heavy curtains were lifted.

This is what she saw.

In two massive chairs, side by side, her father and her lover sat tense and bound.

Sir Philip Vincent looked straight out beyond her with the fixed glare of agony. His face was frightful. By his side Charlie, with a white bandage round the lower part of his face, was trembling and struggling in his bonds. His eyes met hers. They seemed to signal some message.

Muriel covered her face with her hands and bowed her head. "Who are you, who are you?" she cried after a full half minute. Her screaming voice echoed in the high roof and fell back upon her in little flakes of sound.

There was a long silence while the girl crouched shuddering among her cushions. Once or twice she glanced before her. The lights had now been lowered. She saw the dusky outline of her father's tortured frame; Charlie's trembling, straining figure, a hideous picture of impotent agony and longing.

The Voice spoke once more, slowly, with each syllable pealing like a doom bell.

"These men you love will die to-night, and *this* will go back to the land of the Rising Sun."

The Voice had hardly ceased when like ghosts two Japanese came into the screened alcove of her agony carrying an open box. A light shot down from overhead, a light of shimmering jewels rose up to meet it, and Muriel saw the sword, the mirror, and the crystal globe.

It was as if a vision had passed before her eyes. The light above went out; the jewels of Japan and those who bore them vanished.

"If you swear to marry me, your father and the young man, Charles Penrose, will be set free. The regalia of my country will be restored to your father. I will give up all my long hopes for the country of which my mother was a Princess. Choose!"

"Bring me the Book! Bring me the Book!"

"What book?"

"The Book, the Bible on which I will swear to marry you, to save my father, to save my darling, to save Japan. Quick! Bring me the Book!"

The curtain before the alcove fell. Immedi-

ately there was a great burst of music, triumphant music.

Yoshida crouched low, holding out a black book upon a salver of gold. Hardly knowing what she did Muriel bent and kissed it.

Fingers were at her ankles, the golden shackles were unlocked. She rose from her couch, tall, white, and beautiful.

“I have made my sacrifice,” she said, “let the bridegroom come!” She threw up her beautiful white arms and began to laugh.

Peals of ringing, maddened laughter echoed in the roof. “The bridegroom, my bridegroom! Bring him to me, bring him!”

## CHAPTER XIII

PENROSE was back in the windowless room.

The electric fan in the roof whispered quietly as if it was telling some secret to itself. The light from the ceiling flooded the place—Charlie was chained by the ankles as before.

It could hardly have been more than three hours ago since the inhuman creature that was called Lord Helston had flung an incredible threat at his prisoner.

Now Charlie knew that it was all perfectly true.

The whole devilish ingenuity, the supreme stage-management—so to speak—the abominable drama in which he had been forced to play a silent part, had accomplished its ends. The fatal secret of Lady Yeoland's life had been the means of capturing Muriel. Muriel was not only in the power of the monster, she had consented to marry him.

A groan of anguish filled the little room. Lying upon his couch, his hands pressed over his

face, Charlie Penrose tasted a bitterness worse than death.

The diabolical cunning of it all! The figure which Muriel had really believed to be her father! He himself, Charles Penrose, tied, bound, unable to speak, and yet given enough freedom to show that he was alive! Oh, it was hideous to think of, it was enough to turn a man's blood to ice, to change what had been his soul, heart, hope, life to a dead thing of lead.

For himself Charlie had hardly a thought. He knew that Lord Helston's promise to set him free was merely mockery. He awaited death with supreme indifference. For him the world, all life, had ceased, and the sooner he went into nothingness the better he would be pleased. He lay upon his couch oblivious to everything.

Something touched him on the shoulder. It was a little hesitating tap, the touch of a dog suing for recognition.

Charlie turned languidly. The Japanese attendant who had been sitting in the accustomed seat ever since Charlie had been brought back, strongly guarded, from the scene in the great room below, was bending over him.

The young man snarled. "I understand," he

said, "this is my end. Well, put the chloroform upon my face, or stick the knife into my heart as quickly as you can, get it over—I suppose you understand English?"

His words met with a curious answer.

The yellow face that bent over him showed no trace of malice or murder. A brown hand pressed upon his head in warning, and a voice said, "You friend Wag Ashton, mister?"

At the words Charlie sat up in one movement.

"What do you mean?" he whispered.

"You friend Wag Ashton, professor boxing?"

"He's the best friend I've got in the world; but what do you mean?"

"Hush! Wag Ashton my friend too, one time. I know jiu-jitsu game. I come London, one time, teach Englishmen. They not want learn. But I teach Wag Ashton. I teach him all my art, all piecee same; he teach me how box—how hit with hands. He tell me that when I go back Japan, I make pidgin-money, introducin' European boxin'. Wag supreme English person."

"Why do you tell me this?" Charlie answered in a hoarse whisper.

"I know everything, mister! All we Japanese

servants know everything. All others afraid of His Highness, but not me."

"Go on, explain what you mean."

"This, mister, all other servants come straight from Tokio and Nippon, all some time they think master God, also Prince. I been about the world. I waiter at English club in Kobe. I know. Specially I love Wag Ashton—strongest man in England."

"Why do you tell me this?" A new hope was springing up into Charlie's mind.

"You friend Wag Ashton. You got money one time?"

"As much as you like," Charlie whispered, "if you can get me out of this."

"I get you out of this all safe and very simple," came the reply; and the bland Oriental gazed at Charlie with a face as innocent of emotion as the dial of a clock.

Charlie leapt up and his ankle chains rattled. "You can set me free to-night?" he cried.

"Too damn loud, mister," was the reply. "We pretty safe here, but wise not make noises. My orders sit here watch you with pistol"—the creature produced a Browning pistol from his robes with affectionate pride—"my orders watch you

six hours, that bring us to morning, one time. I watch you with this pistol, shoot you dead if necessary."

He handed Charlie the blued-steel pistol, loaded with its clutch of six cartridges.

"Now, one time, you shoot me!" remarked the Japanese without a tremor in his voice.

Charlie gripped the stock of the pistol. Six lives lay within it. He felt a man again, but suddenly he laughed, quietly and bitterly. He turned the pistol full upon the heart of the Japanese.

"What is to prevent me," he whispered, "from shooting you here and now, and then blowing out my brains to save myself from the death that your master has prepared for me?"

The Japanese was quite impassive. He dismissed the suggestion with a slight wave of one hand, and he put the case in a nutshell.

"My friend beautiful Wag Ashton. Me not like this service. Your little girl kept here. You want to get out, one time, and take her away. I want money—that is why you don't shoot me, one piecee, and why I give you my pistol."

By this Charlie had recovered from the stunning blow of an hour ago

"You can have any money you like," he said, "if you will get me out of this frightful house to-night. But I must take Miss Vincent with me."

The Japanese shook his head. "Not to be done," he answered, "not to be done to-night. All other men servants watch round her room. It would mean death for you and for missy."

"And Lord Helston, what of him?"

"He now gone to sleep. Yoshida have give him opium—put in his arm with little shinin' machine. Yoshida manage all the Prince's affairs. Whole castle now quite asleep. Can get you out now."

Charlie's heart was beating rapidly. "Isn't there any way of taking Miss Vincent with us?"

The Asiatic shook his head emphatically. "Not one way," he said. "But you go to Ravenscroft, get Wag Ashton, one time. He come in morning with all others and get missy back, and kill the little one with the great head."

"You hate him?"

"He give me fear to death. I want to be out of this hell house. What will you pay?"

"A thousand pounds in gold sovereigns," Charlie answered without an instant's delay.

"That will do," was the reply, and Charlie

heard a mutter to the effect that "Mr. Wag Ashton would pay the money even if this mister would not."

"Now then, let's get to work. I have got one of your pistols. I can kill you at any moment. How are you going to take off these things on my ankles?"

"You can kill me at any moment, mister," the little man said with a smile. "You think I give you pistol unless I sure I making good bargain? Not one time!"

He bent down, produced a key from his robe, and unlocked the anklets.

"I take them from Hokkei," he smiled quietly. "I put little something in Hokkei's rice water. Hokkei your head warder, mister."

Charlie was free! He was free, he had a loaded pistol in his hand. For a moment the impulse to run shouting through this house of horror, and to rescue Muriel surged within his veins. But prudence conquered. He knew that it was impossible at the moment. He followed the little Japanese out of the room.

All Helston Castle was sleeping—or so it appeared.

Still wearing his boots with india-rubber soles,

Charlie followed his guide through several corridors, and down one broad flight of stairs.

At last his guide stopped in a broad and brilliantly lit passage. He paused outside a door which Charlie seemed to recognise.

It was the door of the great room.

"You go in, one time," the little Japanese said, with a pleasant grin.

Charlie raised his pistol—he had previously ascertained that it was really loaded—and levelled at the head of his guide.

"You are making fun of me," he said; "this is all some trick to torture me once more. But if it is you die in a second."

The Japanese turned the handle and opened the big door without a sign of perturbation.

"Goddam," he said, "you no believe nothing! I friend Wag Ashton, I stand to win thousand gold sovereigns. Come in!"

Charlie followed his guide. The huge hall with its incredibly rich and fantastic decoration was entirely empty.

He saw the screen and couch where Muriel had been. He saw the improvised stage upon which he himself had been tied in dreadful mental torture. The wax figure of Sir Philip Vin-

cent was still there, but the chair was turned round and the thing looked like no more than a great doll.

"And now?" he said. "By the way, have you got a name?"

"Good name, all one time," said the grinning little creature. "Pashiko, me altogether. Now see, mister, how easy—you can go down a rope what?"

"Indeed I can."

"I can too. I got rope." The little man darted over the room, opened the lid of a carved settee, and brought out a coil of good hemp. He drew it out, and with it a large hook of zinc. "Open window," he said briefly, "go down rope, get on moor. You take me quick Ravenscroft. We alarm house and come back rescue missy. Dam easy?"

Charlie was trembling with excitement, though not with fear. His one desire was to be out of the hideous house, to rush to Ravenscroft, to return and storm the Castle.

He was free now—or nearly free. Muriel was still in captivity, but he felt that no harm could happen to her if she was rescued within the next few hours. All was before him; a fierce joy ran

through his veins like wine; he could have shouted aloud in his exhilaration as Pashiko unbarred one of the long windows and tied the rope.

Charlie was testing his means of escape while the sweet, cold night air beat upon his face with a message of welcome, when his little confederate suddenly caught him by the elbow.

"Box belonging to you, one time, no? Box full of shinin' things. Not so good as other things in Castle, but all pieceee belong you?"

Charlie turned. A deep flush of shame mounted to his forehead. Even at the moment of his own escape, which, as he believed, would be only a prelude to the rescue of Muriel, he had forgotten the crown jewels of Japan.

He hurried over the great room and saw the brass-bound box upon the edge of the little stage where he had been bound by the side of Sir Philip's waxen image.

The box was open. He crashed the lid upon the glorious jewels and turned the key in the lock.

He and Pashiko carried the box to the window. It was heavy, but not more so than an ordinary gentleman's suit-case packed for a week-end, yet in that small space, as Charlie knew, the destinies

of the Far East were held. The intrinsic value of its contents was beyond calculation; its possibilities for good or evil beyond thought.

They came to the window. Below yawned an abyss, but the waning winter's moon still shone faintly low down upon the horizon, and the moor was not altogether dark.

"What shall we do?" Charlie asked in a hurried whisper.

"You go down the rope first, I pull him up and let down box. Then I come down myself one time."

With a prayer in his heart Charlie flung his legs over the window-sill, found the rope between his feet, and clutched the ledge. Pashiko held his left hand to steady him and then he caught the rope, and after one sickening moment of suspense descended easily until he came to the terrace in front of the newer portion of the Castle. He gave a tug at the rope, it went up like a serpent to the yellow oblong of the window. He waited there, shivering with the sudden cold, until he heard a bumping noise as the Japanese lowered the heavy box, as now and then it swung against the masonry.

It was done. The box lay upon the gravel.

Charlie hastily untied the rope from the handles; almost before he had finished doing so, the lithe Asiatic was coming down the filament of rope like a gigantic spider.

The first part of their enterprise had ended with perfect success.

Carrying the box between them the two men hurried over the sunken terraces until they came to the last terrace of all and dropped to the moor. Their feet made no sound. They might have been ghosts as they fled from the castle of torment and horror.

Charlie jumped six feet down upon the moor, Pashiko was beside him in a moment. The little Japanese, almost immediately that he had touched the ground, put his feet upon a projection in the stone and caught at the brass-bound box. His strength was enormous. He swung it down with the greatest ease.

"Quick, quick," he said, "we hide this in heather bush, then we run fast to Ravenscroft to save missy."

They stumbled through the gnarled and twisted roots of the heather until they were two hundred yards from the Castle, which loomed up like a great black cliff with one slit of glowing

topaz from the open window from which they had escaped.

"We safe now. No one suspect anything.  
**Hide the box in this bush.**"

They shoved the precious jewels endwards into a huge clump of furze.

"Now we run hard to Ravenscroft?"

"Come on," Charlie replied, "I am as weak as a kitten from being tied up in that filthy place, but you will have to help me."

"Strong will come to you," was the calm answer. "You run for your lady, I help you. Let us go."

The two companions set out over the faint moorland track. The moon afforded them but little light; constantly they stumbled and almost fell, but the Japanese seemed made of steel and india-rubber. Charlie, in perfect training and as well set up a young man as could be seen anywhere, had suffered a little from his imprisonment, but he was still strong. Yet in that headlong rush over the moor, with the word "Muriel" beating to every heart throb, he realised how wonderful the training of the most ordinary Japanese must be. He thought of Wag Ashton—that little being of whip-cord and tempered steel.

His temples began to drum. "If only I were Wag," he muttered thickly.

He sprawled headlong upon the ground, his feet had caught in a gorse bush. As he rose with a scratched and bleeding face it was to find his little companion held firmly in the grip of a half-circle of giants who seemed to have suddenly risen up from the moor.

He heard two or three clicking noises, and half a dozen electric torches poured their radiance upon Pashiko. A deep voice full of excitement broke upon the silence.

"I have got one, Philip! One of those damned scoundrels, I've got one!"

Then Charlie knew. This was the relief party come to find Muriel.

He staggered into the circle of light, and Wag Ashton caught him in his arms.

"Charlie! By all that's wonderful, what's happened? Where's Miss Vincent?"

"Where's Muriel? Where's Muriel?" Sir Philip cried. "My boy, what has happened?"

Charlie could hardly speak. He waved his left arm towards the dark pile of Helston. "She's there," he said, "she's there. I have escaped to

come and fetch you. She must be rescued to-night. There's no time to lose."

"And this Japanese?" Sir Philip asked.

"He has helped me to escape. He will help us to re-enter the Castle and save Muriel."

"She is safe?"

"Perfectly safe, Sir Philip. She has been subjected to an infamous and hellish torture, so cunning and so diabolical that I cannot tell you of it under these circumstances, but she is safe. She has not been otherwise harmed. We shall save her! We shall save her!"

Sir Philip took Charlie aside into the heather. "Tom," he said, "two minutes and we will go on. My brother-in-law has come, Charlie," Sir Philip said in a low voice. "This morning, in my presence, my poor sister committed suicide. It was another ramification of this dreadful affair. She was terrorised from Helston Castle. Helston knew something about her early life and forced her to assist in Muriel's abduction. There is no time to go into details, but poor dear Maria left a full confession. Tom Yeoland is here with eight or nine officers of the garrison. We called them together, and they are pledged to secrecy. I cling to my original purpose. I will keep those

great symbols of Japan, which will place a ruler favourable to England upon the throne of that great country. And I have news—the Mikado is dying!"

"The regalia are safe, Sir Philip. I brought them with me in my escape. The box is some hundred yards away upon the moor. All we have to do now is to save Muriel."

"I have heard nothing of what has happened to you—you have hinted of dreadful things that have happened to Muriel."

"Dreadful things have happened to us both, but it is impossible to explain them. Time presses. You could not, no man could, take in the extraordinary truth in such a hurried conference as this."

"Let us go back to Helston Castle."

The two men came again into the circle of light. Charlie saw that he was surrounded by clean-limbed young fellows in khaki.

"Tom, gentlemen," Sir Philip said, "this is my friend, Charles Penrose, who was at Harrow with my son. He has escaped from grave peril. My daughter is still there"—he threw out his hand. "I have not time to tell you everything

that has occurred. I do not know it all myself, but I think we should be getting on."

There was a low murmur of acquiescence, and then Charlie found himself shaking Sir Thomas Yeoland's hand. "Philip has told you what happened this morning?" the General said in an unsteady voice. "She was my dear wife; lead us on to Helston, sir."

The party crept onwards, winding like a snake over the dark moor. Helston was doomed. Charlie knew that very well. Eight or nine trained young men, drawn from two smart cavalry regiments, accompanied by five or six sergeant-majors, and led by two people like Sir Thomas Yeoland and Sir Philip Vincent—the citadel of horror, the house of dreadful dreams was doomed indeed.

But in its doom would its fairest inmate fall? —that was the question Charlie was asking himself every moment of their approach to the great black pile of masonry. He heard a whispered conversation at his side.

"Pash, old cock, fancy meeting you!"

"What?"

"It was you that got Mr. Penrose out of that place! You will never suffer for it, Pash, old

boy. D'you remember your boxing lessons in the Tottenham Court Road?"

"All one time, Mister Wag, sir. You remember your jiu-jitsu, what?"

"I could toss you over my shoulder now by the forearm grip, Pash."

"Me no think you velly could."

"We will see about that to-morrow—you've got to lead the way now."

The rescue party were standing below the sunk wall which fell to the moor. Charlie explained the situation. He was immensely impressed by the quickness with which these night-walkers understood him.

One khaki-clad figure—a tall, lean sergeant-major—saluted.

"I quite understand, sir," he said to Charlie. "This little Jap has got the hang of everything. Up to the present nothing has been disturbed, as far as we know. There is that window open and lit, the rope is hanging down. The Jap can shin up it like a monkey and fix our ladder. Sergeant Macpherson has a silk ladder with cane rungs upon his back. It won't take a minute. Will you lead the way, sir?"

Charlie nodded. The electric torches were put

out, and the athletic young men hoisted themselves up on to the first terrace, Sir Philip and General Yeoland among them.

In the faint glimmer of the winter moon, in absolute silence, the rescue party crept up to the wall of the great house.

They crouched at the bottom, and over their heads a yellow light shot from the open window of the huge and horrible room above. Then Pashiko was seen mounting upwards.

The little Asiatic was silhouetted upon the window-sill, the silken ladder fell softly upon the gravel with hardly a sound.

Charlie was the first to leap upon it, and he had hardly sprung up ten rungs when the whole thing groaned and tightened, and he knew that his friends were following him.

Throwing his leg over the window-sill he stepped once more into the Room of Harps. It was silent and undisturbed. On every side the electric lights glowed in their silver holders. The golden tapestries upon the walls glittered with their jewelled dragons, the horrible black creatures of the roof hung downwards like stalactites of hell.

One by one, with incredible quickness and in perfect silence, the tall handsome men were helped into the room—the very flower of the northern army, clean, taut, trim in their khaki, officers and non-commissioned officers, all with brown revolver cases strapped to their left sides.

Before they even looked round the room these men pulled out their pistols and examined them. Then they lifted their heads and there was a low murmur of surprise. No single person there had ever seen a place so rich and fantastic as this. Even Sir Philip Vincent, who was accustomed to the private rooms in the palace of the Mikado many years before, realised that here indeed was a sinister and grotesque beauty that struck like a chill upon the heart.

But this was Charlie's moment. He had seen it all before. He was undismayed; he took the lead naturally enough. "Gentlemen," he said in a low voice, "if you will range yourselves round the wall at the far end of the room, by that organ-looking thing. . . ."

With perfect obedience the officers did as he asked. In ten seconds they were in place. Then Charlie turned to Sergeant Macpherson.

"You see that door," he said, pointing to the door which led into Lord Helston's more private apartments, "that is the door you have got to watch, Sergeant. Please go to it, and stand on one side, having your pistol ready for anything that may happen."

The sergeant saluted automatically and crept to his post.

"Gentlemen," Charlie said, "I am now going to find Miss Vincent with Pashiko."

The little Japanese shook his head violently. "No, no," he said, "you not go. Too dangerous. Three men sleep on stairs leading to missy's room. You make too much noise. I take Mister Wag. He understand jiu-jitsu. We put those three to sleep."

Charlie was entirely in the hands of Pashiko. He sat down in a chair of carved wood, the arms of which were studded with bosses of turquoise and inlaid with platinum and silver. Someone came up to him; a tall, khaki-clad figure was pouring something into the silver cup of a flask. "Drink this, sir," said a pleasant, modulated voice. "You have gone through a great deal, this will do you good."

Charlie drank. It was brandy that the young captain of Hussars had given him. It pulled him together, and he sat waiting.

One, two, five minutes, and then the door leading into the corridor opened noiselessly, and the Japanese and Wag entered. Between them they urged an aged Japanese woman with grey hair and a twisted face of torture. Wag was holding a pistol to her head.

"Miss Muriel isn't in the room where she has been since they got her here," Wag said. "This old woman has been her attendant. Miss Muriel is in that room there"—he flung out his arm towards the door by which Sergeant Macpherson was doing sentry. "I think we ought to be quick," Wag concluded.

There was a general movement, led by Charlie. The men passed over the floor of woven matting in a solid mass. Charlie turned the handle of the door. It opened noiselessly, and they pressed in with hardly a sound.

Then they saw Muriel Vincent.

She was standing at the far end of a long panelled room. Her arms were raised above her head. "Ah, the bridegroom comes!" she cried in

a shrill, unnatural voice. “At last the bridegroom comes!”

Sir Philip, Sir Thomas Yeoland, and the young officers stood hesitating upon the threshold. The panelled room was brilliantly lit by clusters of lights which fell from the ceiling. They saw a lovely girl with her hair unbound—some of them had met her before at dances in London, others had only heard of her—but they all saw Sir Philip’s daughter standing there laughing in terrible hysteria, with her white arms raised. She was expectant of some horror, not of them, and she was robed from head to foot in the figured silks which only a princess of the royal house of Japan can wear.

It was Sir Philip who realised this. It was Sir Philip who ran along the room and called aloud to his daughter. He had not reached her when her arms fell, and the wild light died from her eyes.

“Father!” she cried. “Father! Charlie!”

Sobbing, weeping in an abandonment of joy, Charlie and Sir Philip helped Muriel to the hushed circle of her rescue party.

They were all closing round the girl with words

of encouragement and hope when the panelled Tudor room, with its brilliant lights and soft carpets, seemed to shake and tremble. It was an illusion, an illusion of sound.

A great voice was coming nearer and nearer —a great voice singing a song.

And all the men there, save only Charlie and Pashiko, stiffened and bent forward, and the music grew nearer and advanced. The late diplomatist, the elderly General, the young gay officers were alike captured by a voice such as they had never heard before; a voice which penetrated to the very heart-strings of pain and love.

Muriel was leaning upon her father's shoulder. As she heard the voice she shook till Sir Philip could hardly hold her.

"He is coming," she cried, "the bridegroom. Father, I promised to marry him to save you and Charlie, but I needn't now, need I?"

The big door at the other end of the room swung open and closed again.

A little creature in robes of green and gold came shuffling in. Then the grotesque dwarf stopped, frozen into the semblance of a china statuette.

There was a moment of tense silence. With a sob of horror Muriel turned her face away, and clasped her arms around her father's neck. The young officers recoiled in a body, as if they were parts of one machine. The whole thing was so utterly unexpected, so impossibly weird.

"What's that?" came in sharp, staccato accents from Sir Thomas Yeoland. "What's that, Mr. Penrose?"

"That's Lord Helston," Charlie replied.

"Lord Helston!" burst from Sir Philip—"that!"

Sergeant Macpherson had been standing at the end of the crescent of officers. He was a very capable soldier whose imagination was defective, but whose sense of humour was strong.

Sergeant Macpherson threw back his head, and peals of laughter burst from him. The laughter was infectious. The young subalterns and captains joined in, and the panelled room echoed with an ecstasy of mirth. Higher and higher still it rose, until the rafters rang.

The tiny and yet terrible figure remained motionless.

Then the small mouth opened, and from it

came a volume of sound so strong, so musical, so marvellous, that laughter was beaten down as a fire of sticks is forced down by the sun.

An immense musical wail of denunciation and despair which the men who heard it remember still on hot Indian nights or when warm sea winds blow over the garrisons of Cape Town—then the sudden whip-like crack of a pistol shot.

The huge head seemed to sink to the ground, softly like a balloon. The tiny supporting body collapsed. Viscount Helston, Baron Mountclare, Prince Saumarito had taken the very easiest way out of his difficulty.

The voice of an archangel was stilled for ever. A tortured soul had fled a monstrous body, and never again would the sound of harps be heard in Helston.

When, six months afterwards, the new alliance was made between England and Japan, there were certain journals which could not understand the necessity for raising Sir Philip Vincent, our late Ambassador, to a peerage. The fact that the peerage descended in the female line, and that Mrs. Charles Penrose was now the Honourable

Mrs. Charles Penrose, and would eventually be Lady Ravenscroft, was noted with some asperity.

Half-way up Regent Street the Wagton Ashton School of Physical Culture and Japanese Improvement is a familiar landmark in the West End. There are two doorkeepers. One is a heavy, elderly commissionaire, of the Oriental Picture Palace, dressed in a gorgeous uniform, who answers in private life to the name of Tom Kipps. The other, who is never seen outside, but presides over the inner hall, is a spick-and-span little Japanese gentleman in a frock coat and trousers beautifully creased.

In the reception-room itself, where intending candidates for health and beauty eventually meet the famous Mr. Wagton Ashton, the sub-manager, Pashiko, greets all comers with unfailing suavity.

Now and then Lord Ravenscroft, his daughter, and his son-in-law drive up to the Wagton Ashton Institute, and those distinguished persons spend a long time there.

And when their motor drives them away, Mr. Wagton Ashton and Mrs. Wagton Ashton, known as Jane Gregory in the past, always come

over the pavement to assist their friends and patrons.

It is Charles Penrose who gets into the motor last, and as he does so he feels the pressure of a thumb in his waistcoat.

“Hallo, Charlie!”

“Hallo, Wag!”

THE END









